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ISAAC ASIMOV
The Dark Companion

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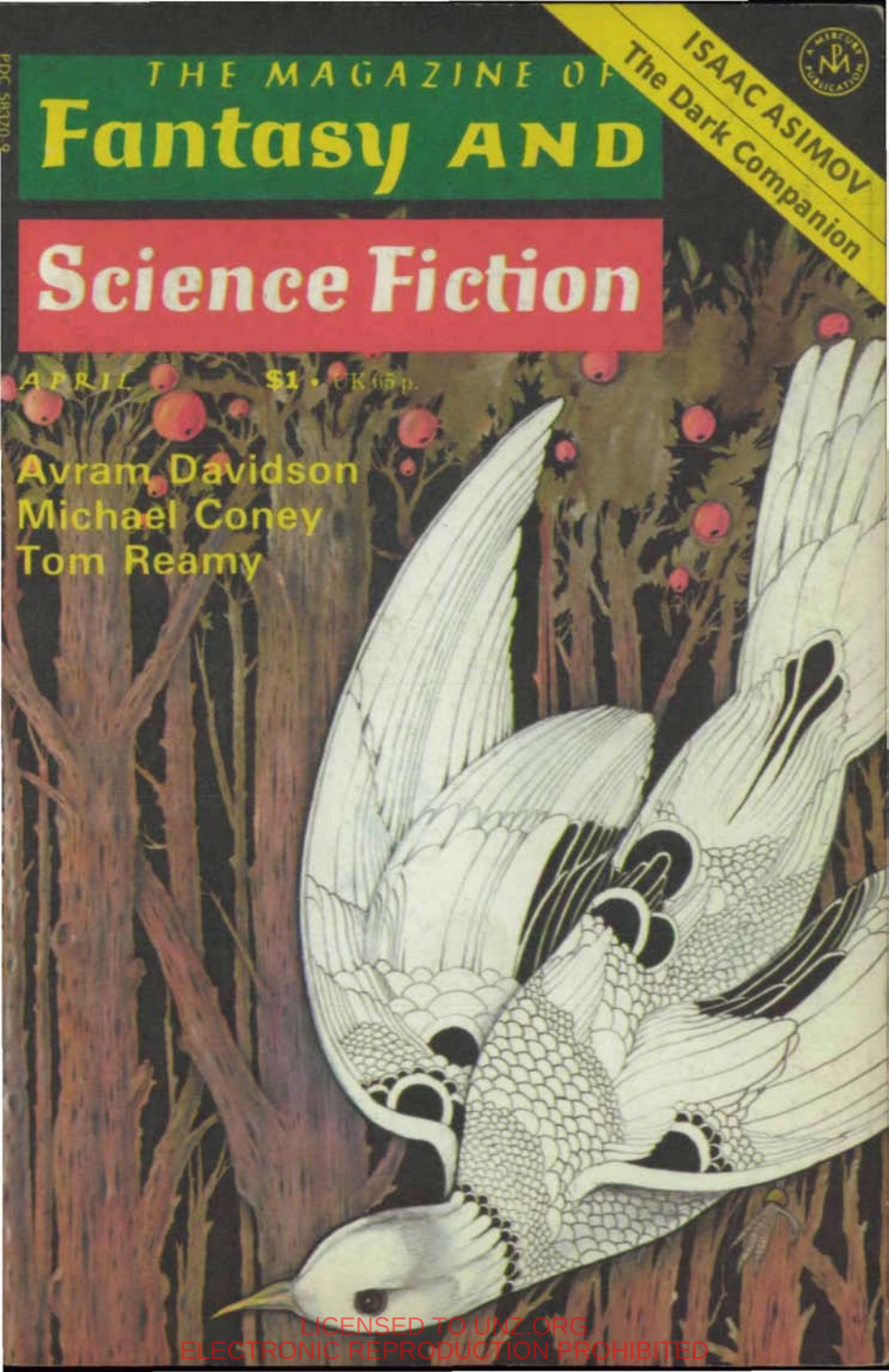
Tom Reamy



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction

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Edward L. Ferman, EDITOR & PUBLISHER — Isaac Asimov, SCIENCE COLUMNIST
Dale Farrell, CIRCULATION MANAGER — Audrey Ferman, BUSINESS MANAGER
Anne W. Burke, ASSISTANT EDITOR

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Tom Reamy's first F&SF story was "Twilla" (September 1974); his second was "San Diego Lightfoot Sue," (August 1975), which won a 1976 Nebula award from the Science Fiction Writers of America. He has quickly established a reputation as a traditional storyteller of unusual power; once you have begun a Reamy story, you will not put it down, nor will you soon forget it.

The Detweiler Boy

by TOM REAMY

The room had been cleaned with pine oil disinfectant and smelled like a public toilet. Harry Spinner was on the floor behind the bed, scrunched down between it and the wall. The almost colorless chenille bedspread had been pulled askew exposing part of the clean, but dingy, sheet. All I could see of Harry was one leg poking over the edge of the bed. He wasn't wearing a shoe, only a faded brown and tan argyle sock with a hole in it. The sock, long bereft of any elasticity, was crumpled around his thin rusty ankle.

I closed the door quietly behind me and walked around the end of the bed so I could see all of him. He was huddled on his back with his elbows propped up by the wall and the bed. His throat had been cut. The blood hadn't spread very far. Most of it had been soaked up by the threadbare carpet under the bed. I looked around the grubby little room but didn't find anything. There were no signs of a struggle, no signs of forced entry — but then, my BankAmericard hadn't left any signs either. The window was open, letting in the muffled roar of traffic on the Boulevard. I stuck my head out and looked, but it was three stories straight down to the neon-lit marquee of the movie house.

It had been nearly two hours since Harry called me. "Bertram, my boy, I've run across something very peculiar. I don't really know what to make of it."

I had put away the report I was writing on Lucas McGowan's hyperactive wife. (She had a definite predilection for gas-pump jockeys, car-wash boys, and parking-lot attendants. I guess it had something to do with the Age of the Automobile.) I propped my feet on my desk and leaned back until the old swivel chair groaned a protest.

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"What did you find this time, Harry? A nest of international spies or an invasion from Mars?" I guess Harry Spinner wasn't much use to anyone, not even himself, but I liked him. He'd helped me in a couple of cases, nosing around in places only the Harry Spinners of the world can nose around in unnoticed. I was beginning to get the idea he was trying to play Doctor Watson to my Sherlock Holmes.

"Don't tease me, Bertram. There's a boy here in the hotel. I saw something I don't think he wanted me to see. It's extremely odd."

Harry was also the only person in the world, except my mother, who called me Bertram. "What did you see?"

"I'd rather not talk about it over the phone. Can you come over?"

Harry saw too many old private-eye movies on the late show. "It'll be a while. I've got a client coming in in a few minutes to pick up the poop on his wandering wife."

"Bertram, you shouldn't waste your time and talent on divorce cases."

"It pays the bills, Harry. Besides, there aren't enough Maltese falcons to go around."

By the time I filled Lucas McGowan in on all the details (I got the impression he was less concerned with his wife's infidelity than with her taste; that it wouldn't have been so bad if she'd been shacking up with movie stars or international playboys), collected my fee, and grabbed a Thursday special at Colonel Sanders, almost two hours had passed. Harry hadn't answered my knock, and so I let myself in with a credit card.

Birdie Pawlowicz was a fat, slovenly old broad somewhere between forty and two hundred. She was blind in her right eye and wore a black felt patch over it. She claimed she had lost the eye in a fight with a Creole whore over a riverboat gambler. I believed her. She ran the Brewster Hotel the way Florence Nightingale must have run that stinking army hospital in the Crimea. Her tenants were the losers habitating that rotting section of the Boulevard east of the Hollywood Freeway. She bossed them, cursed them, loved them, and took care of them. And they loved her back. (Once, a couple of years ago, a young black buck thought an old fat lady with one eye would be easy pickings. The cops found him three days later, two blocks away, under some rubbish in an alley where he'd hidden. He had a broken arm, two cracked ribs, a busted nose, a few missing teeth, and was stone-dead from internal hemorrhaging.)

The Brewster ran heavily in the red, but Birdie didn't mind. She

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had quite a bit of property in Westwood which ran very, very heavily in the black. She gave me an obscene leer as I approached the desk, but her good eye twinkled.

"Hello, lover!" she brayed in a voice like a cracked boiler. "I've lowered my price to a quarter. Are you interested?" She saw my face and her expression shifted from lewd to wary. "What's wrong, Bert?"

"Harry Spinner. You'd better get the cops, Birdie. Somebody killed him."

She looked at me, not saying anything, her face slowly collapsing into an infinitely weary resignation. Then she turned and telephoned the police.

Because it was just Harry Spinner at the Brewster Hotel on the wrong end of Hollywood Boulevard, the cops took over half an hour to get there. While we waited I told Birdie everything I knew, about the phone call and what I'd found.

"He must have been talking about the Detweiler boy," she said, frowning. "Harry's been kinda friendly with him, felt sorry for him, I guess."

"What's his room? I'd like to talk to him."

"He checked out."

"When?"

"Just before you came down."

"Damn!"

She bit her lip. "I don't think the Detweiler boy killed him."

"Why?"

"I just don't think he could. He's such a gentle boy."

"Oh, Birdie," I groaned, "you know there's no such think as a killer type. Almost anyone will kill with a good enough reason."

"I know," she sighed, "but I still can't believe it." She tapped her scarlet fingernails on the dulled Formica desk top. "How long had Harry been dead?"

He had phoned me about ten after five. I had found the body at seven. "A while," I said. "The blood was mostly dry."

"Before six-thirty?"

"Probably."

She sighed again, but this time with relief. "The Detweiler boy was down here with me until six thirty. He'd been here since about four fifteen. We were playing gin. He was having one of his spells and wanted company."

"What kind of spell? Tell me about him, Birdie."

"But he couldn't have killed Harry," she protested.

"Okay," I said, but I wasn't entirely convinced. Why would anyone deliberately and brutally murder inoffensive, invisible Harry Spinner right after he told me he had discovered something "peculiar" about the Detweiler boy? Except the Detweiler boy?

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"Tell me anyway. If he and Harry were friendly, he might know something. Why do you keep calling him a boy; how old is he?"

She nodded and leaned her bulk on the registration desk. "Early twenties, twenty-two, twenty-three, maybe. Not very tall, about five five or six. Slim, dark curly hair, a real good-looking boy. Looks like a movie star except for his back."

"His back?"

"He has a hump. He's a hunchback."

That stopped me for a minute, but I'm not sure why. I must've had a mental picture of Charles Laughton riding those bells or Igor stealing that brain from the laboratory. "He's good-looking and he's a hunchback?"

"Sure." She raised her eyebrows. The one over the patch didn't go up as high as the other. "If you see him from the front, you can't even tell."

"What's his first name?"

"Andrew."

"How long has he been living here?"

She consulted a file card. "He checked in last Friday night. The 22nd. Six days."

"What's this spell he was having?"

"I don't know for sure. It was the second one he'd had. He would get pale and nervous. I think he was in a lot of pain. It would get worse and worse all day; then he'd be fine, all rosy and healthy-looking."

"Sounds to me like he was hurtin' for a fix."

"I thought so at first, but I changed my mind. I've seen enough of that and it wasn't the same. Take my word. He was real bad this evening. He came down about four fifteen, like I said. He didn't complain, but I could tell he was wantin' company to take his mind off it. We played gin until six thirty. Then he went back upstairs. About twenty minutes later he came down with his old suitcase and checked out. He looked fine, all over his spell."

"Did he have a doctor?"

"I'm pretty sure he didn't. I asked him about it. He said there was nothing to worry about, it would pass. And it did."

"Did he say why he was leaving or where he was going?"

"No, just said he was restless and wanted to be movin' on. Sure hated to see him leave. A real nice kid."

When the cops finally got there, I told them all I knew — except I didn't mention the Detweiler boy. I hung around until I found out that Harry almost certainly wasn't killed after six thirty. They set the time somewhere between five ten, when he called me, and six. It looked like

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Andrew Detweiler was innocent, but what "peculiar" thing had Harry noticed about him, and why had he moved out right after Harry was killed? Birdie let me take a look at his room, but I didn't find a thing, not even an abandoned paperclip.

Friday morning I sat at my desk trying to put the pieces together. Trouble was, I only had two pieces and *they* didn't fit. The sun was coming in off the Boulevard, shining through the window, projecting the chipping letters painted on the glass against the wall in front of me. BERT MALLORY Confidential Investigations. I got up and looked out. This section of the Boulevard wasn't rotting yet, but it wouldn't be long.

There's one sure gauge for judging a part of town: the movie theaters. It never fails. For instance, a new picture hadn't opened in downtown L.A. in a long, long time. The action ten years ago was on the Boulevard. Now it's in Westwood. The grand old Pantages, east of Vine and too near the freeway, used to be the site of the most glittering premieres. They even had the Oscar ceremonies there for a while. Now it shows exploitation and double-feature horror films. Only Grauman's Chinese and the once Paramount, once Loew's, now Downtown Cinema (or something) at the west end got good openings. The Nu-View, across the street and down, was showing an X-rated double feature. It was too depressing. So I closed the blind.

Miss Tremaine looked up from her typing at the rattle and frowned. Her desk was out in the small reception area, but I had arranged both desks so we could see each other and talk in normal voices when the door was open. It stayed open most of the time except when I had a client who felt secretaries shouldn't know his troubles. She had been transcribing the Lucas McGowan report for half an hour, *humphing* and *tsk-tsking* at thirty-second intervals. She was having a marvelous time. Miss Tremaine was about forty-five, looked like a constipated librarian, and was the best secretary I'd ever had. She'd been with me seven years. I'd tried a few young and sexy ones, but it hadn't worked out. Either they wouldn't play at all, or they wanted to play all the time. Both kinds were a pain in the ass to face first thing in the morning, every morning.

"Miss Tremaine, will you get Gus Verdugo on the phone, please?"

"Yes, Mr. Mallory." She dialed the phone nimbly, sitting as if she were wearing a back brace.

Gus Verdugo worked in R&I. I had done him a favor once, and he

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insisted on returning it tenfold. I gave him everything I had on Andrew Detweiler and asked him if he'd mind running it through the computer. He wouldn't mind. He called back in fifteen minutes. The computer had never heard of Andrew Detweiler and had only seven hunchbacks, none of them fitting Detweiler's description.

I was sitting there, wondering how in hell I would find him, when the phone rang again. Miss Tremaine stopped typing and lifted the receiver without breaking rhythm. "Mr. Mallory's office," she said crisply, really letting the caller know he'd hooked onto an efficient organization. She put her hand over the mouthpiece and looked at me. "It's for you — an obscene phone call." She didn't bat an eyelash or twitch a muscle.

"Thanks," I said and winked at her. She dropped the receiver back on the cradle from a height of three inches and went back to typing. Grinning, I picked up my phone. "Hello, Janice," I said.

"Just a minute till my ear stops ringing," the husky voice tickled my ear.

"What are you doing up this early?" I asked. Janice Fenwick was an exotic dancer at a club on the Strip nights and was working on her master's in oceanography at UCLA in the afternoons. In the year I'd known her I'd seldom seen her stick her nose into the sunlight before eleven.

"I had to catch you before you started following that tiresome woman with the car."

"I've finished that. She's picked up her last parking-lot attendant — at least with this husband," I chuckled.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"What's up?"

"I haven't had an indecent proposition from you in days. So I thought I'd make one of my own."

"I'm all ears."

"We're doing some diving off Catalina tomorrow. Want to come along?"

"Not much we can do in a wetsuit."

"The wetsuit comes off about four; then we'll have Saturday night and all of Sunday."

"Best indecent proposition I've had all week."

Miss Tremaine *humphed*. It might have been over something in the report, but I don't think it was.

I picked up Janice at her apartment in Westwood early Saturday morning. She was waiting for me and came striding out to the car all legs and healthy golden flesh. She was wearing white shorts, sneakers, and that damned Dallas Cowboys jersey. It was authentic. The name and number on it were quite well-known — even to non-football fans. She wouldn't tell me how she got it,

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just smirked and looked smug. She tossed her suitcase in the back seat and slid up against me. She smelled like sunshine.

We flew over and spent most of the day *glubbing* around in the Pacific with a bunch of kids fifteen years younger than I and five years younger than Janice. I'd been on these jaunts with Janice before and enjoyed them so much I'd bought my own wetsuit. But I didn't enjoy it nearly as much as I did Saturday night and all of Sunday.

I got back to my apartment on Beachwood fairly late Sunday night and barely had time to get something to eat at the Mexican restaurant around the corner on Melrose. They have marvelous carne asada. I live right across the street from Paramount, right across from the door people go in to see them tape *The Odd Couple*. Every Friday night when I see them lining up out there, I think I might go someday, but I never seem to get around to it. (You might think I'd see a few movie stars living where I do, but I haven't. I did see Seymour occasionally when he worked at Channel 9, before he went to work for Gene Autry at Channel 5.)

I was so pleasantly pooped I completely forgot about Andrew Detweiler. Until Monday morning when I was sitting at my desk reading the *Times*.

It was a small story on page three, not very exciting or newsworthy. Last night a man named Maurice Milian, age 51, had fallen through the plate-glass doors leading onto the terrace of the high rise where he lived. He had been discovered about midnight when the people living below him had noticed dried blood on *their* terrace. The only thing to connect the deaths of Harry Spinner and Maurice Milian was a lot of blood flowing around. If Milian had been murdered, there *might* be a link, however tenuous. But Milian's death was accidental — a dumb, stupid accident. It niggled around in my brain for an hour before I gave in. There was only one way to get it out of my head.

"Miss Tremaine, I'll be back in an hour or so. If any slinky blondes come in wanting me to find their kid sisters, tell 'em to wait."

She *humphed* again and ignored me.

The Almsbury was half a dozen blocks away on Yucca. So I walked. It was a rectangular monolith about eight stories tall, not real new, not too old, but expensive-looking. The small terraces protruded in neat, orderly rows. The long, narrow grounds were immaculate with a lot of succulents that looked like they might have been imported from Mars. There were also the inevitable palm trees

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and clumps of bird of paradise. A small, discrete, polished placard dangled in a wrought-iron frame proclaiming, ever so softly, NO VACANCY.

Two willowy young men gave me appraising glances in the carpeted lobby as they exited into the sunlight like exotic jungle birds. It's one of those, I thought. My suspicions were confirmed when I looked over the tenant directory. All the names seemed to be male, but none of them was Andrew Detweiler.

Maurice Milian was still listed as 407. I took the elevator to four and rang the bell of 409. The bell played a few notes of Bach, or maybe Vivaldi or Telemann. All those old Baroques sound alike to me. The vision of loveliness who opened the door was about forty, almost as slim as Twiggy, but as tall as I. He wore a flowered silk shirt open to the waist, exposing his bony hairless chest, and tight white pants that might as well have been made of Saran Wrap. He didn't say anything, just let his eyebrows rise inquiringly as his eyes flicked down, then up.

"Good morning," I said and showed him my ID. He blanched. His eyes became marbles brimming with terror. He was about to panic, tensing to slam the door. I smiled my friendly, disarming smile and went on as if I hadn't noticed. "I'm inquiring about a man named Andrew Detweiler." The terror trickled from his eyes, and I could see his thin chest throbbing. He gave me a blank look that meant he'd never heard the name.

"He's about twenty-two," I continued, "dark, curly hair, very good-looking."

He grinned wryly, calming down, trying to cover his panic. "Aren't they all?" he said.

"Detweiler is a hunchback."

His smile contracted suddenly. His eyebrows shot up. "Oh," he said. "Him."

Bingo!

Mallory, you've led a clean, wholesome life and it's paying off.

"Does he live in the building?" I swallowed to get my heart back in place and blinked a couple of times to clear away the skyrockets.

"No. He was ... visiting."

"May I come in and talk to you about him?"

He was holding the door three quarters shut, and so I couldn't see anything in the room but an expensive-looking color TV. He glanced over his shoulder nervously at something behind him. The inner ends of his eyebrows drooped in a frown. He looked back at me and started to say something, then, with a small defiance, shrugged his eyebrows. "Sure, but there's not much I can tell you."

He pushed the door all the way

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open and stepped back. It was a good-sized living room come to life from the pages of a decorator magazine. A kitchen behind a half wall was on my right. A hallway led somewhere on my left. Directly in front of me were double sliding glass doors leading to the terrace. On the terrace was a bronzed hunk of beef stretched out nude trying to get bronzer. The hunk opened his eyes and looked at me. He apparently decided I wasn't competition and closed them again. Tall and lanky indicated one of two identical orange-and brown-striped couches facing each other across a football-field-size marble and glass cocktail table. He sat on the other one, took a cigarette from an alabaster box and lit it with an alabaster lighter. As an afterthought, he offered me one.

"Who was Detweiler visiting?" I asked as I lit the cigarette. The lighter felt cool and expensive in my hand.

"Maurice — next door," he inclined his head slightly toward 407.

"Isn't he the one who was killed in an accident last night?"

He blew a stream of smoke from pursed lips and tapped his cigarette on an alabaster ashtray. "Yes," he said.

"How long had Maurice and Detweiler known each other?"

"Not long."

"How long?"

He snuffed his cigarette out on pure-white alabaster and sat so prim and pristine I would have bet his feces came out wrapped in cellophane. He shrugged his eyebrows again. "Maurice picked him up somewhere the other night."

"Which night?"

He thought a moment. "Thursday, I think. Yes, Thursday."

"Was Detweiler a hustler?"

He crossed his legs like a Forties pin-up and dangled his Roman sandal. His lips twitched scornfully. "If he was, he would've starved. He was de-*formed*!"

"Maurice didn't seem to mind." He sniffed and lit another cigarette. "When did Detweiler leave?"

He shrugged. "I saw him yesterday afternoon. I was out last night ... until quite late."

"How did they get along? Did they quarrel or fight?"

"I have no idea. I only saw them in the hall a couple of times. Maurice and I were ... not close." He stood, fidgety. "There's really not anything I can tell you. Why don't you ask David and Murray. They and Maurice are ... were thick as thieves."

"David and Murray?"

"Across the hall. 408."

I stood up. "I'll do that. Thank you very much." I looked at the

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plate-glass doors. I guess it would be pretty easy to walk through one of them if you thought it was open. "Are all the apartments alike? Those terrace doors?"

He nodded. "Ticky-tacky."

"Thanks again."

"Don't mention it." He opened the door for me and then closed it behind me. I sighed and walked across to 408. I rang the bell. It didn't play anything, just went *bing-bong*.

David (or Murray) was about twenty-five, red-headed, and freckled. He had a slim, muscular body which was also freckled. I could tell because he was wearing only a pair of jeans, cut off very short, and split up the sides to the waistband. He was barefooted and had a smudge of green paint on his nose. He had an open, friendly face and gave me a neutral smile-for-a-stranger. "Yes?" he asked.

I showed him my ID. Instead of going pale he only looked interested. "I was told by the man in 409 you might be able to tell me something about Andrew Detweiler."

"Andy?" He frowned slightly. "Come on in. I'm David Fowler." He held out his hand.

I shook it. "Bert Mallory." The apartment couldn't have been more different from the one across the hall. It was comfortable and cluttered, and dominated by a drafting table surrounded by jars of brushes and boxes of paint tubes. Architecturally, however, it was almost identical. The terrace was covered with potted plants rather than naked muscles. David Fowler sat on the stool at the drafting table and began cleaning brushes. When he sat, the split in his shorts opened and exposed half his butt, which was also freckled. But I got the impression he wasn't exhibiting himself; he was just completely indifferent.

"What do you want to know about Andy?"

"Everything."

He laughed. "That lets me out. Sit down. Move the stuff."

I cleared a space on the couch and sat. "How did Detweiler and Maurice get along?"

He gave me a knowing look. "Fine. As far as I know. Maurice liked to pick up stray puppies. Andy was a stray puppy."

"Was Detweiler a hustler?"

He laughed again. "No. I doubt if he knew what the word means."

"Was he gay?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

He grinned. "Haven't you heard? We can spot each other a mile away. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, I would. Thank you."

He went to the half wall separating the kitchen and poured

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two cups from a pot that looked like it was kept hot and full all the time. "It's hard to describe Andy. There was something very little-boyish about him. A real innocent. Delighted with everything new. It's sad about his back. Real sad." He handed me the cup and returned to the stool. "There was something very secretive about him. Not about his feelings; he was very open about things like that."

"Did he and Maurice have sex together?"

"No. I told you it was a stray puppy relationship. I wish Murray were here. He's much better with words than I am. I'm visually oriented."

"Where is he?"

"At work. He's a lawyer."

"Do you think Detweiler could have killed Maurice?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He was here with us all evening. We had dinner and played Scrabble. I think he was real sick, but he tried to pretend he wasn't. Even if he hadn't been here I would not think so."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"He left about half an hour before they found Maurice. I imagine he went over there, saw Maurice dead, and decided to disappear. Can't say as I blame him. The police might've gotten some funny ideas. We didn't mention him."

"Why not?"

"There was no point in getting him involved. It was just an accident."

"He couldn't have killed Maurice after he left here?"

"No. They said he'd been dead over an hour. What did Desmond tell you?"

"Desmond?"

"Across the hall. The one who looks like he smells something bad."

"How did you know I talked to him and not the side of beef?"

He laughed and almost dropped his coffee cup. "I don't think Roy *can* talk."

"He didn't know nothin' about nothin'." I found myself laughing also. I got up and walked to the glass doors. I slid them open and then shut again. "Did you ever think one of these was open when it was really shut?"

"No. But I've heard of it happening."

I sighed. "So have I." I turned and looked at what he was working on at the drafting table. It was a small painting of a boy and girl, she in a soft white dress, and he in jeans and tee shirt. They looked about fifteen. They were embracing, about to kiss. It was quite obviously the first time for both of them. It was good. I told him so.

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He grinned with pleasure. "Thanks. It's for a paperback cover."

"Whose idea was it that Detweiler have dinner and spend the evening with you?"

He thought for a moment. "Maurice." He looked up at me and grinned. "Do you know stamps?"

It took me a second to realize what he meant. "You mean stamp collecting? Not much."

"Maurice was a philatelist. He specialized in postwar Germany — locals and zones, things like that. He'd gotten a kilo of buildings and wanted to sort them undisturbed."

I shook my head. "You've lost me. A kilo of buildings?"

He laughed. "It's a set of twenty-eight stamps issued in the American Zone in 1948 showing famous German buildings. Conditions in Germany were still pretty chaotic at the time, and the stamps were printed under fairly makeshift circumstances. Consequently, there's an enormous variety of different perforations, watermarks, and engravings. Hundreds as a matter of fact. Maurice could spend hours and hours poring over them."

"Are they valuable?"

"No. Very common. Some of the varieties are hard to find, but they're not valuable." He gave me a knowing look. "Nothing was missing from Maurice's apartment."

I shrugged. "It had occurred to me to wonder where Detweiler got his money."

"I don't know. The subject never came up." He wasn't being defensive.

"You liked him, didn't you?"

There was a weary sadness in his eyes. "Yes," he said.

That afternoon I picked up Birdie Pawlowicz at the Brewster Hotel and took her to Harry Spinner's funeral. I told her about Maurice Milian and Andrew Detweiler. We talked it around and around. The Detweiler boy obviously couldn't have killed Harry *or* Milian, but it was stretching coincidence a little bit far.

After the funeral I went to the Los Angeles Public Library and started checking back issues of the *Times*. I'd only made it back three weeks when the library closed. The LA *Times* is *thick*, and unless the death is sensational or the dead prominent, the story might be tucked in anywhere except the classifieds.

Last Tuesday, the 26th, a girl had cut her wrists with a razor blade in North Hollywood.

The day before, Monday, the 25th, a girl had miscarried and hemorrhaged. She had bled to death because she and her boy friend were stoned out of their

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heads. They lived a block off Western — very near the Brewster — and Detweiler was at the Brewster Monday.

Sunday, the 24th, a wino had been knifed in MacArthur Park.

Saturday, the 23rd, I had three. A knifing in a bar on Pico, a shooting in a rooming house on Irolo, and a rape and knifing in an alley off La Brea. Only the gunshot victim had bled to death, but there had been a lot of blood in all three.

Friday, the 22nd, the same day Detweiler checked in the Brewster, a two-year-old boy had fallen on an upturned rake in his backyard on Larchemont — only eight or ten blocks from where I lived on Beachwood. And a couple of Chicano kids had had a knife fight behind Hollywood High. One was dead and the other was in jail. Ah, *machismo*!

The list went on and on, all the way back to Thursday, the 7th. On that day was another slashed-wrist suicide near Western and Wilshire.

The next morning, Tuesday, the 3rd, I called Miss Tremaine and told her I'd be late getting in but would check in every couple of hours to find out if the slinky blonde looking for her kid sister had shown up. She *humphed.*

Larchemont is a middle-class neighborhood huddled in between the old wealth around the country club and the blight spreading down Melrose from Western Avenue. It tries to give the impression of suburbia — and does a pretty good job of it — rather than just another nearly downtown shopping center. The area isn't big on apartments or rooming houses, but there are a few. I found the Detweiler boy at the third one I checked. It was a block and a half from where the little kid fell on the rake.

According to the landlord, at the time of the kid's death Detweiler was playing bridge with him and a couple of elderly old-maid sisters in number twelve. He hadn't been feeling well and had moved out later that evening — to catch a bus to San Diego, to visit his ailing mother. The landlord had felt sorry for him, so sorry he'd broken a steadfast rule and refunded most of the month's rent Detweiler had paid in advance. After all, he'd only been there three days. So sad about his back. Such a nice, gentle boy — a writer, you know.

No, I didn't know, but it explained how he could move around so much without seeming to work.

I called David Fowler: "Yes, Andy had a portable typewriter, but he hadn't mentioned being a writer."

And Birdie Pawlowicz: "Yeah, he typed a lot in his room."

I found the Detweiler boy again

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on the 16th and the 19th. He'd moved into a rooming house near Silver Lake Park on the night of the 13th and moved out again on the 19th. The landlady hadn't refunded his money, but she gave him an alibi for the knifing of an old man in the park on the 16th and the suicide of a girl in the same rooming house on the 19th. He'd been in the pink of health when he moved in, sick on the 16th, healthy the 17th, and sick again the 19th.

It was like a rerun. He lived a block away from where a man was mugged, knifed, and robbed in an alley on the 13th — though the details of the murder didn't seem to fit the pattern. But he was sick, had an alibi, and moved to Silver Lake.

Rerun it on the 10th: a woman slipped in the bathtub and fell through the glass shower doors, cutting herself to ribbons. Sick, alibi, moved.

It may be because I was always rotten in math, but it wasn't until right then that I figured out Detweiler's timetable. Milian died the 1st, Harry Spinner the 28th, the miscarriage was on the 25th, the little kid on the 22nd, Silver Lake on the 16th and 19th, etc., etc., etc.

A bloody death occurred in Detweiler's general vicinity every third day.

But I couldn't figure out a pattern for the victims: male, female, little kids, old aunties, married, unmarried, rich, poor, young, old. No pattern of any kind, and there's *always* a pattern. I even checked to see if the names were in alphabetical order.

I got back to my office at six. Miss Tremaine sat primly at her desk, cleared of everything but her purse and a notepad. She reminded me quite a lot of Desmond. "What are you still doing here, Miss Tremaine? You should've left an hour ago." I sat at my desk, leaned back until the swivel chair groaned twice, and propped my feet up.

She picked up the pad. "I wanted to give you your calls."

"Can't they wait? I've been sleuthing all day and I'm bushed."

"No one is paying you to find this Detweiler person, are they?"

"No."

"Your bank statement came today."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. A good secretary keeps her employer informed. I was informing you."

"Okay. Who called?"

She consulted the pad, but I'd bet my last gumshoe she knew every word on it by heart. "A Mrs. Carmichael called. Her French poodle has been kidnaped. She wants you to find her."

"Ye Gods! Why doesn't she go to the police?"

"Because she's positive her

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ex-husband is the kidnaper. She doesn't want to get him in any trouble; she just wants Gwendolyn back."

"Gwendolyn?"

"Gwendolyn. A Mrs. Bushyager came by. She wants you to find her little sister."

I sat up so fast I almost fell out of the chair. I gave her a long, hard stare, but her neutral expression didn't flicker. "You're kidding." Her eyebrows rose a millimeter. "Was she a slinky blonde?"

"No. She was a dumpy brunette."

I settled back in the chair, trying not to laugh. "Why does Mrs. Bushyager want me to find her little sister?" I sputtered.

"Because Mrs. Bushyager thinks she's shacked up somewhere with *Mr.* Bushyager. She'd like you to call her tonight."

"Tomorrow. I've got a date with Janice tonight." She reached in her desk drawer and pulled out my bank statement. She dropped it on the desk with a papery plop. "Don't worry," I assured her, "I won't spend much money. Just a little spaghetti and wine tonight and ham and eggs in the morning." She *humphed*. My point. "Anything else?"

"A Mr. Bloomfeld called. He wants you to get the goods on Mrs. Bloomfeld so he can sue for divorce."

I sighed. Miss Tremaine closed the pad. "Okay. No to Mrs. Carmichael and make appointments for Bushyager and Bloomfeld." She lowered her eyelids at me. I spread my hands. "Would Sam Spade go looking for a French poodle maned Gwendolyn?"

"He might if he had your bank statement. Mr. Bloomfeld will be in at two, Mrs. Bushyager at three."

"Miss Tremaine, you'd make somebody a wonderful mother." She didn't even *humph*; she just picked up her purse and stalked out. I swiveled the chair around and looked at the calendar. Tomorrow was the 4th.

Somebody would die tomorrow and Andrew Detweiler would be close by.

I scooted up in bed and leaned against the headboard. Janice snorted into the pillow and opened one eye, pinning me with it. "I didn't mean to wake you," I said.

"What's the matter," she muttered, "too much spaghetti?"

"No. Too much Andrew Detweiler."

She scooted up beside me, keeping the sheet over her breasts, and turned on the light. She rummaged around on the nightstand for a cigarette. "Who wants to divorce him?"

"That's mean, Janice," I groaned.

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"You want a cigarette?"

"Yeah."

She put two cigarettes in her mouth and lit them both. She handed me one. "You don't look a bit like Paul Henreid," I said.

She grinned. "That's funny. You look like Bette Davis. Who's Andrew Detweiler?"

So I told her.

"It's elementary, my dear Sherlock," she said. "Andrew Detweiler is a vampire." I frowned at her. "Of course, he's a *clever* vampire. Vampires are usually stupid. They always give themselves away by leaving those two little teeth marks on people's jugulars."

"Darling, even vampires have to be at the scene of the crime."

"He always has an alibi, huh?"

I got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. "That's suspicious in itself."

When I came out she said, "Why?"

"Innocent people usually don't have alibis, especially not one every three days."

"Which is probably why innocent people get put in jail so often."

I chuckled and sat on the edge of the bed. "You may be right."

"Bert, do that again."

I looked at her over my shoulder. "Do what?"

"Go to the bathroom."

"I don't think I can. My bladder holds only so much."

"I don't mean that. Walk over to the bathroom door."

I gave her a suspicious frown, got up, and walked over to the bathroom door. I turned around, crossed my arms, and leaned against the door frame. "Well?"

She grinned. "You've got a cute rear end. Almost as cute as Burt Reynolds'. Maybe he's twins."

"What?" I practically screamed.

"Maybe Andrew Detweiler is twins. One of them commits the murders and the other establishes the alibis."

"Twin vampires?"

She frowned. "That is a bit much, isn't it? Had they discovered blood groups in Bram Stoker's day?"

I got back in bed and pulled the sheet up to my waist, leaning beside her against the headboard. "I haven't the foggiest idea."

"That's another way vampires are stupid. They never check the victim's blood group. The wrong blood group can kill you."

"Vampires don't exactly get transfusions."

"It all amounts to the same thing, doesn't it?" I shrugged. "Oh, well," she sighed, "vampires are stupid." She reached over and plucked at the hair on my chest. "I haven't had an indecent proposition in hours," she grinned.

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So I made one.

Wednesday morning I made a dozen phone calls. Of the nine victims I knew about, I was able to find the information on six.

All six had the same blood group.

I lit a cigarette and leaned back in the swivel chair. The whole thing was spinning around in my head. I'd found *a* pattern for the victims, but I didn't know if it was *the* pattern. It just didn't make sense. Maybe Detweiler *was* a vampire.

"Mallory," I said out loud, "you're cracking up."

Miss Tremaine glanced up. "If I were you, I'd listen to you," she said poker-faced.

The next morning I staggered out of bed at six a.m. I took a cold shower, shaved, dressed, and put Murine in my eyes. They still felt like I'd washed them in rubber cement. Mrs. Bloomfeld had kept me up until two the night before, doing all the night spots in Santa Monica with some dude I hadn't identified yet. When they checked into a motel, I went home and went to bed.

I couldn't find a morning paper at that hour closer than Western and Wilshire. The story was on page seven. Fortunately they found the body in time for the early edition. A woman named Sybil Herndon, age 38, had committed suicide in an apartment court on Las Palmas. (Detweiler hadn't gone very far. The address was just around the corner from the Almsbury.) She had cut her wrists on a piece of broken mirror. She had been discovered about eleven thirty when the manager went over to ask her to turn down the volume on her television set.

It was too early to drop around, and so I ate breakfast, hoping this was one of the times Detweiler stuck around for more than three days. Not for a minute did I doubt he would be living at the apartment court on Las Palmas, or not far away.

The owner-manager of the court was one of those creatures peculiar to Hollywood. She must have been a starlet in the Twenties or Thirties, but success had eluded her. So she had tried to freeze herself in time. She still expected, at any moment, a call from The Studio. But her flesh hadn't cooperated. Her hair was the color of tarnished copper, and the fire-engine-red lipstick was painted far past her thin lips. Her watery eyes peered at me through a Lone Ranger mask of Maybelline on a plaster-white face. Her dress had obviously been copied from the wardrobe of Norma Shearer.

"Yes?" She had a breathy voice. Her eyes quickly traveled the length of my body. That happens often enough to keep me feeling

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good, but this time it gave me a queasy sensation, like I was being measured for a mummy case. I showed her my ID. and asked if I could speak to her about one of the tenants.

"Of course. Come on in. I'm Lorraine Nesbitt." Was there a flicker of disappointment that I hadn't recognized the name? She stepped back holding the door for me. I could tell that detectives, private or otherwise, asking about her tenants wasn't a new thing. I walked into the doilied room, and she looked at me from a hundred directions. The faded photographs covered every level surface and clung to the walls like leeches. She had been quite a dish — forty years ago. She saw me looking at the photos and smiled. The make-up around her mouth cracked.

"Which one do you want to ask me about?" The smile vanished and the cracks closed.

"Andrew Detweiler." She looked blank. "Young, good-looking, with a hunchback."

The cracks opened. "Oh, yes. He's only been here a few days. The name had slipped my mind."

"He's still here?"

"Oh, yes." She sighed. "It's so unfair for such a beautiful young man to have a physical impairment."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Not much. He's only been here since Sunday night. He's very handsome, like an angel, a dark angel. But it wasn't his handsomeness that attracted me." She smiled. "I've seen many handsome men in my day, you know. It's difficult to verbalize. He has such an incredible innocence. A lost, doomed look that Byron must have had. A vulnerability that makes you want to shield and protect him. I don't know for sure what it is, but it struck a chord in my soul. Soul," she mused. "Maybe that's it. He wears his soul on his face." She nodded, as if to herself. "A dangerous thing to do." She looked back up at me. "If that quality, whatever it is, would photograph, he would become a star overnight, whether he could act or not. Except — of course — for his infirmity."

Lorraine Nesbitt, I decided, was as nutty as a fruitcake.

Someone entered the room. He stood leaning against the door frame, looking at me with sleepy eyes. He was about twenty-five, wearing tight chinos without underwear and a tee shirt. His hair was tousled and cut unfashionably short. He had a good looking Kansas face. The haircut made me think he was new in town, but the eyes said he wasn't. I guess the old broad liked his hair that way.

She simpered. "Oh, Johnny! Come on in. This detective was

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asking about Andrew Detweiler in number seven." She turned back to me. "This is my protege, Johnny Peacock — a very talented young man. I'm arranging for a screen test as soon as Mr. Goldwyn returns my calls." She lowered her eyelids demurely. "I was a Goldwyn Girl, you know."

Funny, I thought Goldwyn was dead. Maybe be wasn't.

Johnny took the news of his impending stardom with total unconcern. He moved to the couch and sat down, yawning. "Detweiler? Don't think I ever laid eyes on the man. What'd he do?"

"Nothing. Just routine." Obviously he thought I was a police detective. No point in changing his mind. "Where was he last night when the Herndon woman died?"

"In his room, I think. I heard his typewriter. He wasn't feeling well," Lorraine Nesbitt said. Then she sucked air through her teeth and clamped her fingers to her scarlet lips. "Do you think he had something to do with *that*?"

Detweiler had broken his pattern. He didn't have an alibi. I couldn't believe it.

"Oh, Lorraine," Johnny grumbled.

I turned to him. "Do you know where Detweiler was?"

He shrugged. "No idea."

"Then why are you so sure he had nothing to do with it?"

"She committed suicide."

"How do you know for sure?"

"The door was bolted from the inside. They had to break it down to get in."

"What about the window? Was it locked too?"

"No. The window was open. But it has bars on it. No way anybody could get in."

"When I couldn't get her to answer my knock last night, I went around to the window and looked in. She was lying there with blood all over." She began to sniffle. Johnny got up and put his arms around her. He looked at me, grinned, and shrugged.

"Do you have a vacancy?" I asked, getting a whiz-bang idea.

"Yes," she said, the sniffles disappearing instantly. "I have two. Actually three, but I can't rent Miss Herndon's room for a few days — until someone claims her things."

"I'd like to rent the one closest to number seven," I said.

I wasn't lucky enough to get number six or eight, but I did get five. Lorraine Nesbitt's nameless, dingy apartment court was a fleabag. Number five was one room with a closet, a tiny kitchen, and a tiny bath — identical with the other nine units she assured me. With a good deal of tugging and grunting the couch turned into a lumpy bed. The refrigerator looked as if

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someone had spilled a bottle of Br'er Rabbit back in 1938 and hadn't cleaned it up yet. The stove looked like a lube rack. Well, I sighed, it was only for three days. I had to pay a month's rent in advance anyway, but I put it down as a bribe to keep Lorrain's and Johnny's mouths shut about my being a detective.

I moved in enough clothes for three days, some sheets and pillows, took another look at the kitchen and decided to eat out. I took a jug of Lysol to the bathroom and crossed my fingers. Miss Tremaine brought up the bank statement and *humphed* a few times.

Number five had one door and four windows — identical to the other nine Lorraine assured me. The door had a heavy-duty bolt that couldn't be fastened or unfastened from the outside. The window beside the door didn't open at all and wasn't intended to. The bathroom and kitchen windows cranked out and were tall and skinny, about twenty-four by six. The other living room window, opposite the door, slid upward. The iron bars bolted to the frame were so rusted I doubted if they could be removed without ripping out the whole window. It appeared Andrew Detweiler had another perfect alibi after all — along with the rest of the world.

I stood outside number seven suddenly feeling like a teen-ager about to pick up his first date. I could hear Detweiler's typewriter *tickety-ticking* away inside. Okay, Mallory, this is what you've been breaking your neck on for a week.

I knocked on the door.

I heard the typewriter stop ticking and the scrape of a chair being scooted back. I didn't hear anything else for fifteen or twenty seconds, and I wondered what he was doing. Then the bolt was drawn and the door opened.

He was buttoning his shirt. That must have been the delay: he wouldn't want anyone to see him with his shirt off. Everything I'd been told about him was true. He wasn't very tall; the top of his head came to my nose. He was dark, though not as dark as I'd expected. I couldn't place his ancestry. It certainly wasn't Latin-American and I didn't think it was Slavic. His features were soft without the angularity usually found in the Mediterranean races. His hair wasn't quite black. It wasn't exactly long and it wasn't exactly short. His clothes were non-descript. Everything about him was neutral — except his face. It was just about the way Lorraine Nesbitt had described it. If you called central casting and asked for a male angel, you'd get Andrew Detweiler in a blonde wig. His body

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was slim and well-formed — from where I was standing I couldn't see the hump and you'd never know there was one. I had a glimpse of his bare chest as he buttoned the shirt. It wasn't muscular but it was very well made. He was very healthy-looking — pink and flushed with health, though slightly pale as if he didn't get out in the sun much. His dark eyes were astounding. If you blocked out the rest of the face, leaving nothing but the eyes, you'd swear he was no more than four years old. You've seen little kids with those big, guileless, unguarded, inquiring eyes, haven't you?

"Yes?" he asked.

I smiled. "Hello, I'm Bert Mallory. I just moved in to number five. Miss Nesbitt tells me you like to play gin."

"Yes," he grinned. "Come on in."

He turned to move out of my way and I saw the hump. I don't know how to describe what I felt. I suddenly had a hurting in my gut. I felt the same unfairness and sadness the others had, the way you would feel about any beautiful thing with one overwhelming flaw.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I? I heard the typewriter." The room was indeed identical to mine, though it looked a hundred per cent more livable. I couldn't put my finger on what he had done to it to make it that way. Maybe it was just the semidarkness. He had the curtains tightly closed and one lamp lit beside the typewriter.

"Yeah, I was working on a story, but I'd rather play gin." He grinned, open and artless. "If I could make money playing gin, I wouldn't write."

"Lots of people make money playing gin."

"Oh, I couldn't. I'm too unlucky."

He certainly had a right to say that, but there was no self-pity, just an observation. Then he looked at me with slightly distressed eyes. "You ... ah ... didn't want to play for money, did you?"

"Not at all," I said and his eyes cleared. "What kind of stories do you write?"

"Oh, all kinds." He shrugged. "Fantasy mostly."

"Do you sell them?"

"Most of 'em."

"I don't recall seeing your name anywhere. Miss Nesbitt said it was Andrew Detweiler?"

He nodded. "I use another name. You probably wouldn't know it either. It's not exactly a household word." His eyes said he'd really rather not tell me what it was. He had a slight accent, a sort of soft slowness, not exactly a drawl and not exactly Deep South. He shoved the typewriter over and pulled out a deck of cards.

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"Where're you from?" I asked. "I don't place the accent."

He grinned and shuffled the cards. "North Carolina. Back in the Blue Ridge."

We cut and I dealt. "How long have you been in Hollywood?"

"About two months."

"How do you like it?"

He grinned his beguiling grin and picked up my discard. "It's very ... unusual. Have you lived here long, Mr. Mallory?"

"Bert. All my life. I was born in Inglewood. My mother still lives there."

"It must be ... unusual ... to live in the same place all your life."

"You move around a lot?"

"Yeah. Gin."

I laughed. "I thought you were unlucky."

"If we were playing for money, I wouldn't be able to do anything right."

We played gin the rest of the afternoon and talked — talked a lot. Detweiler seemed eager to talk or, at least, eager to have someone to talk with. He never told me anything that would connect him to nine deaths, mostly about where he'd been, things he'd read. He read a lot, just about anything he could get his hands on. I got the impression he hadn't really *lived* life so much as he'd *read* it, that all the things he knew about had never physically affected him. He was like an insulated island. Life flowed around him but never touched him. I wondered if the hump on his back made that much difference, if it made him such a green monkey he'd had to retreat into his insular existence. Practically everyone I had talked to liked him, mixed with varying portions of pity, to be sure, but liking nevertheless. Harry Spinner liked him, but had discovered something "peculiar" about him. Birdie Pawlowicz, Maurice Milian, David Fowler, Lorraine Nesbitt, they all liked him.

And, God damn it, I liked him too.

At midnight I was still awake, sitting in number five in my jockey shorts with the light out and the door open. I listened to the ticking of the Detweiler boy's typewriter and the muffled roar of Los Angeles. And thought, and thought and thought. And got nowhere.

Someone walked by the door, quietly and carefully. I leaned my head out. It was Johnny Peacock. He moved down the line of bungalows silent as a shadow. He turned south when he reached the sidewalk. Going to Selma or the Boulevard to turn a trick and make a few extra bucks. Lorraine must keep tight purse strings. Better watch it, kid. If she finds out, you'll be back on the streets again. And you haven't got too many years left

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where you can make good money by just gettin' it up.

I dropped in at the office for a while Friday morning and checked the first-of-the-month bills. Miss Tremaine had a list of new prospective clients. "Tell everyone I can't get to anything till Monday."

She nodded in disapproval. "Mr. Bloomfeld called."

"Did he get my report?"

"Yes. He was very pleased, but he wants the man's name."

"Tell him I'll get back on it Monday."

"Mrs. Bushyager called. Her sister and Mr. Bushyager are still missing."

"Tell her I'll get on it Monday." She opened her mouth. "If you say anything about my bank account, I'll put Spanish fly in your Ovaltine." She didn't *humph*, she giggled. I wonder how many points *that* is?

That afternoon I played gin with the Detweiler boy. He was genuinely glad to see me, like a friendly puppy. I was beginning to feel like a son of a bitch.

He hadn't mentioned North Carolina except that once the day before, and I was extremely interested in all subjects he wanted to avoid. "What's it like in the Blue Ridge? Coon huntin' and moonshine?"

He grinned and blitzed me. "Yeah, I guess. Most of the things you read about it are pretty nearly true. It's really a different world back in there, with almost no contact with the outside."

"How far in did you live?"

"About as far as you can get without comin' out the other side. Did you know most of the people never heard of television or movies and some of 'em don't even know the name of the President? Most of 'em never been more than thirty miles from the place they were born, never saw an electric light? You wouldn't believe it. But it's more than just *things* that're different. People are different, think different — like a foreign country." He shrugged. "I guess it'll all be gone before too long though. Things keep creepin' closer and closer. Did you know I never went to school?" he said grinning. "Not a day of my life. I didn't wear shoes till I was ten. You wouldn't believe it." He shook his head, remembering. "Always kinda wished I coulda gone to school," he murmured softly.

"Why did you leave?"

"No reason to stay. When I was eight, my parents were killed in a fire. Our house burned down. I was taken in by a balmy old woman who lived not far away. I had some kin, but they didn't want me." He looked at me, trusting me. "They're pretty superstitious back in there, you know. Thought I was

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... marked. Anyway, the old woman took me in. She was a midwife, but she fancied herself a witch or something. Always making me drink some mess she'd brewed up. She fed me, clothed me, educated me, after a fashion, tried to teach me all her conjures, but I never could take 'em seriously." He grinned sheepishly. "I did chores for her and eventually became a sort of assistant, I guess. I helped her birth babies ... I mean, deliver babies a couple of times, but that didn't last long. The parents were afraid me bein' around might mark the baby. She taught me to read and I couldn't stop. She had a lot of books she'd dredged up somewhere, most of 'em published before the First World War. I read a complete set of encyclopedias — published in 1911."

I laughed.

His eyes clouded. "Then she ... died. I was fifteen, so I left. I did odd jobs and kept reading. Then I wrote a story and sent it to a magazine. They bought it; paid me fifty dollars. Thought I was rich, so I wrote another one. Since then I've been traveling around and writing. I've got an agent who takes care of everything, and so all I do is just write."

Detweiler's flush of health was wearing off that afternoon. He wasn't ill, just beginning to feel like the rest of us mortals. And I was feeling my resolve begin to crumble. It was hard to believe this beguiling kid could possibly be involved in a string of bloody deaths. Maybe it was just a series of unbelievable coincidences. Yeah, "unbelievable" was the key word. He *had* to be involved unless the laws of probability had broken down completely. Yet I could swear Detweiler wasn't putting on an act. His guileless innocence was real, damn it, *real*.

Saturday morning, the third day since Miss Herndon died, I had a talk with Lorraine and Johnny. If Detweiler wanted to play cards or something that night, I wanted them to agree and suggest I be a fourth. If he didn't bring it up, I would, but I had a feeling he would want his usual alibi this time.

Detweiler left his room that afternoon for the first time since I'd been there. He went north on Las Palmas, dropped a large Manila envelope in the mailbox (the story he'd been working on, I guess), and bought groceries at the supermarket on Highland. Did that mean he wasn't planning to move? I had a sudden pang in my belly. What if he was staying because of his friendship with *me*? I felt more like a son of a bitch every minute.

Johnny Peacock came by an hour later acting very conspiratorial. Detweiler had suggested a bridge game that night, but Johnny

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didn't play bridge, and so they settled on Scrabble.

I dropped by number seven. The typewriter had been put away, but the cards and score pad were still on the table. His suitcase was on the floor by the couch. It was riveted cowhide of a vintage I hadn't seen since I was a kid. Though it wore a mellow patina of age, it had been preserved with neat's-foot oil and loving care. I may have been mistaken about his not moving.

Detweiler wasn't feeling well at all. He was pale and drawn and fidgety. His eyelids were heavy and his speech was faintly blurred. I'm sure he was in pain, but he tried to act as if nothing were wrong.

"Are you sure you feel like playing Scrabble tonight?" I asked.

He gave me a cheerful, if slightly strained, smile. "Oh, sure. I'm all right. I'll be fine in the morning."

"Do you think you ought to play?"

"Yeah, it ... takes my mind off my ... ah ... headache. Don't worry about it. I have these spells all the time. They always go away."

"How long have you had them?"

"Since ... I was a kid." He grinned. "You think it was one of those brews the old witch-woman gave me caused it? Maybe I could sue for malpractice."

"Have you seen a doctor? A real one?"

"Once."

"What did he tell you?"

He shrugged. "Oh, nothing much. Take two aspirin, drink lots of liquids, get plenty of rest, that sort of thing." He didn't want to talk about it. "It always goes away."

"What if one time it doesn't?"

He looked at me with an expression I'd never seen before, and I knew why Lorraine said he had a lost, doomed look. "Well, we can't live forever, can we? Are you ready to go?"

The game started out like a Marx Brothers routine. Lorraine and Johnny acted like two canaries playing Scrabble with the cat, but Detweiler was so normal and unconcerned they soon settled down. Conversation was tense and ragged at first until Lorraine got off on her "career" and kept us entertained and laughing. She had known a lot of famous people and was a fountain of anecdotes, most of them funny and libelous. Detweiler proved quickly to be the best player, but Johnny, to my surprise, was no slouch. Lorraine played dismally but she didn't seem to mind.

I would have enjoyed the evening thoroughly if I hadn't known someone nearby was dead or dying.

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After about two hours, in which Detweiler grew progressively more ill, I excused myself to go to the bathroom. While I was away from the table, I palmed Lorraine's master key.

In another half hour I said I had to call it a night. I had to get up early the next morning. I always spent Sunday with my mother in Inglewood. My mother was touring Yucatan at the time, but that was neither here nor there. I looked at Johnny. He nodded. He was to make sure Detweiler stayed at least another twenty minutes and then follow him when he did leave. If he went anywhere but his apartment, he was to come and let me know, quick.

I let myself into number seven with the master key. The drapes were closed, and so I took a chance and turned on the bathroom light. Detweiler's possessions were meager. Eight shirts, six pairs of pants, and a light jacket hung in the closet. The shirts and jacket had been altered to allow for the hump. Except for that, the closet was bare. The bathroom contained nothing out of the ordinary — just about the same as mine. The kitchen had one plastic plate, one plastic cup, one plastic glass, one plastic bowl, one small folding skillet, one small folding sauce pan, one metal spoon, one metal fork, and a medium-sized kitchen knife. All of it together would barely fill a shoebox.

The suitcase, still beside the couch, hadn't been unpacked — except for the clothes hanging in the closet and the kitchen utensils. There was underwear, socks, an extra pair of shoes, an unopened ream of paper, a bunch of other stuff necessary for his writing, and a dozen or so paperbacks. The books were rubber-stamped with the name of a used-book store on Santa Monica Boulevard. They were a mixture: science fiction, mysteries, biographies, philosophy, several by Colin Wilson.

There was also a carbon copy of the story he'd just finished. The return address on the first page was a box number at the Hollywood post office. The title of the story was "Deathsong." I wish I'd had time to read it.

All in all, I didn't find anything. Except for the books and the deck of cards there was nothing of Andrew Detweiler personally in the whole apartment. I hadn't thought it possible for anyone to lead such a turnip existence.

I look around to make sure I hadn't disturbed anything, turned off the bathroom light, and got in the closet, leaving the door open a crack. It was the only possible place to hide. I sincerely hoped Detweiler wouldn't need anything out of it before I found out what was going

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on. If he did, the only thing I could do was confront him with what I'd found out. And then what, Mallory, a big guilty confession? With what you've found out he could laugh in your face and have you arrested for illegal entry.

And what about this, Mallory. What if someone died nearby tonight while you were with Detweiler; what if he comes straight to his apartment and goes to bed; what if he wakes up in the morning feeling fine; what if nothing is going on, you son of a bitch?

It was so dark in there with the curtains drawn that I couldn't see a thing. I left the closet and opened them a little on the front window. It didn't let in a lot of light, but it was enough. Maybe Detweiler wouldn't notice. I went back to the closet and waited.

Half an hour later the curtains over the barred open window moved. I had squatted down in the closet and wasn't looking in that direction, but the movement caught my eye. Something hopped in the window and scooted across the floor and went behind the couch. I only got a glimpse of it, but it might have been a cat. It was probably a stray looking for food or hiding from a dog. Okay, cat, you don't bother me and I won't bother you. I kept my eye on the couch, but it didn't show itself again.

Detweiler didn't show for another hour. By that time I was sitting flat on the floor trying to keep my legs from cramping. My position wasn't too graceful if he happened to look in the closet, but it was too late to get up.

He came in quickly and bolted the door behind him. He didn't notice the open curtain. He glanced around, clicking his tongue softly. His eyes caught on something at the end of the couch. He smiled. At the *cat*? He began unfastening his shirt, fumbling at the buttons in his haste. He slipped off the shirt and tossed it on the back of a chair.

There were straps across his chest.

He turned toward the suitcase, his back to me. The hump was artificial, made of something like foam rubber. He unhooked the straps, opened the suitcase, and tossed the hump in. He said something, too soft for me to catch, and lay face down on the couch with his feet toward me. The light from the opened curtain fell on him. His back was scarred, little white lines like scratches grouped around a hole.

He had a hole in his back, between his shoulder blades, an unhealed wound big enough to stick your finger in.

Something came around the end of the couch. It wasn't a cat. I thought it was a monkey, and then

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a frog, but it was neither. It was human. It waddled on all fours like an enormous toad.

Then it stood erect. It was about the size of a cat. It was pink and moist and hairless and naked. Its very human hands and feet and male genitals were too large for its tiny body. Its belly was swollen, turgid and distended like an obscene tick. Its head was flat. Its jaw protruded like an ape's. It too had a scar, a big, white, puckered scar between its shoulder blades, at the top of its jutting backbone.

It reached its too-large hand up and caught hold of Detweiler's belt. It pulled its bloated body up with the nimbleness of a monkey and crawled onto the boy's back. Detweiler was breathing heavily, clasping and unclasping his fingers on the arm of the couch.

The thing crouched on Detweiler's back and placed its lips against the wound.

I felt my throat burning and my stomach turning over, but I watched in petrified fascination.

Detweiler's breathing grew slower and quieter, more relaxed. He lay with his eyes closed and an expression of almost sexual pleasure on his face. The thing's body got smaller and smaller, the skin on its belly growing wrinkled and flaccid. A trickle of blood crawled from the wound, making an erratic line across the Detweiler boy's back. The thing reached out its hand and wiped the drop back with a finger.

It took about ten minutes. The thing raised its mouth and crawled over beside the boy's face. It sat on the arm of the couch like a little gnome and smiled. It ran its fingers down the side of Detweiler's cheek and pushed his damp hair back out of his eyes. Detweiler's expression was euphoric. He sighed softly and opened his eyes sleepily. After a while he sat up.

He was flushed with health, rosy and clear and shining.

He stood up and went in the bathroom. The light came on and I heard water running. The thing sat in the same place watching him. Detweiler came out of the bathroom and sat back on the couch. The thing climbed onto his back, huddling between his shoulder blades, its hands on his shoulders. Detweiler stood up, the thing hanging onto him, retrieved the shirt, and put it on. He wrapped the straps neatly around the artificial hump and stowed it in the suitcase. He closed the lid and locked it.

I had seen enough, more than enough. I opened the door and stepped out of the closet.

Detweiler whirled, his eyes bulging. A groan rattled in his throat. He raised his hands as if fending me off. The groan rose in

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pitch, becoming an hysterical keening. The expression on his face was too horrible to watch. He stepped backward and tripped over the suitcase.

He lost his balance and toppled over. His arms flailed for equilibrium, but never found it. He struck the edge of the table. It caught him square across the hump on his back. He bounced and fell forward on his hands. He stood up agonizingly, like a slow motion movie, arching his spine backward, his face contorted in pain.

There were shrill, staccato shrieks of mindless torment, but they didn't come from Detweiler.

He fell again, forward onto the couch, blacking out from pain. The back of his shirt was churning. The scream continued, hurting my ears. Rips appeared in the shirt and a small misshapen arm poked out briefly. I could only stare, frozen. The shirt was ripped to shreds. Two arms, a head, a torso came through. The whole thing ripped its way out and fell onto the couch beside the boy. Its face was twisted, tortured, and its mouth kept opening and closing with the screams. Its eyes looked uncomprehendingly about. It pulled itself along with its arms, dragging its useless legs, its spine obviously broken. It fell off the couch and flailed about on the floor.

Detweiler moaned and came to. He rose from the couch, still groggy. He saw the thing, and a look of absolute grief appeared on his face.

The thing's eyes focused for a moment on Detweiler. It looked at him, beseeching, held out one hand, pleading. Its screams continued, that one monotonous, hopeless note repeated over and over. It lowered its arm and kept crawling about mindlessly, growing weaker.

Detweiler stepped toward it, ignoring me, tears pouring down his face. The thing's struggles grew weaker, the scream became a breathless rasping. I couldn't stand it any longer. I picked up a chair and smashed it down on the thing. I dropped the chair and leaned against the wall and heaved.

I heard the door open. I turned and saw Detweiler run out.

I charged after him. My legs felt rubbery but I caught him at the street. He didn't struggle. He just stood there, his eyes vacant, trembling. I saw people sticking their heads out of doors and Johnny Peacock coming toward me. My car was right there. I pushed Detweiler into it and drove away. He sat hunched in the seat, his hands hanging limply, staring into space. He was trembling uncontrollably and his teeth chattered.

I drove, not paying any attention to where I was going,

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almost as deeply in shock as he was. I finally started looking at the street signs. I was on Mullholland. I kept going west for a long time, crossed the San Diego Freeway, into the Santa Monica Mountains. The pavement ends a couple of miles past the freeway, and there's ten or fifteen miles of dirt road before the pavement picks up again nearly to Topanga. The road isn't traveled much, there are no houses on it, and people don't like to get their cars dusty. I was about in the middle of the unpaved section when Detweiler seemed to calm down. I pulled over to the side of the road and cut the engine. The San Fernando Valley was spread like a carpet of lights below us. The ocean was on the other side of the mountains.

I sat and watched Detweiler. The trembling had stopped. He was asleep or unconscious. I reached over and touched his arm. He stirred and clutched at my hand. I looked at his sleeping face and didn't have the heart to pull my hand away.

The sun was poking over the mountains when he woke up. He roused and was momentarily unaware of where he was; then memory flooded back. He turned to me. The pain and hysteria were gone from his eyes. They were oddly peaceful.

"Did you hear him?" he said softly. "Did you hear him die?"

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes. It's all over."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

His eyes dropped and he was silent for a moment. "I want to tell you. But I don't know how without you thinking I'm a monster."

I didn't say anything.

"He ... was my brother. We were twins. Siamese twins. All those people died so I could stay alive." There was no emotion in his voice. He was detached, talking about someone else. "He kept me alive. I'll die without him." His eyes met mine again. "He was insane, I think. I thought at first I'd go mad too, but I didn't. I think I didn't. I never knew what he was going to do, who he would kill. I didn't want to know. He was very clever. He always made it look like an accident or suicide when he could. I didn't interfere. I didn't want to die. We had to have blood. He always did it so there was lots of blood, so no one would miss what he took." His eyes were going empty again.

"Why did you need the blood?"

"We were never suspected before."

"Why did you need the blood?" I repeated.

"When we were born," he said, and his eyes focused again, "we were joined at the back. But I grew and he didn't. He stayed little bitty,

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like a baby riding around on my back. People didn't like me ... us. they were afraid. My father and mother too. The old witch-woman I told you about, she birthed us. She seemed always to be hanging around. When I was eight, my parents died in a fire. I think the witch-woman did it. After that I lived with her. She was demented, but she knew medicine and healing. When we were fifteen she decided to separate us. I don't know why. I think she wanted him without me. I'm sure she thought he was an imp from hell. I almost died. I'm not sure what was wrong. Apart, we weren't whole. I wasn't whole. He had something I didn't have, something we'd been sharing. She would've let me die, but he knew and got blood for me. Hers." He sat staring at me blankly, his mind living the past.

"Why didn't you go to a hospital or something?" I asked, feeling enormous pity for the wretched boy.

He smiled faintly. "I didn't know much about anything then. Too many people were already dead. If I'd gone to a hospital, they'd have wanted to know how I'd stayed alive so far. Sometimes I'm glad it's over, and, then, the next minute I'm terrified of dying."

"How long?"

"I'm not sure. I've never been more than three days. I can't stand it any longer than that. He knew. He always knew when I had to have it. And he got it for me. I never helped him."

"Can you stay alive if you get regular transfusions?"

He looked at me sharply, fear creeping back. "Please. No!"

"But you'll stay alive."

"In a cage! Like a freak! I don't want to be a freak anymore. It's over. I want it to be over. Please."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know. I don't want you to get in trouble."

I looked at him, at his face, at his eyes, at his soul. "There's a gun in the glove compartment," I said.

He sat for a moment, then solemnly held out his hand. I took it. He shook my hand, then opened the glove compartment. He removed the gun and slipped out of the car. He went down the hill into the brush.

I waited and waited and never did hear a shot.

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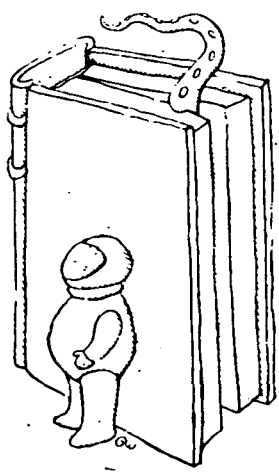
ALGIS BUDRYS
Books

The Dragon and the George, Gordon R. Dickson, Various editions.

A World Out of Time, Larry Niven, Holt, Rinehart, Winston. $7.95.

Mindbridge, Joe Haldeman, St. Martin's Press, $8.95.



We have three good books this time. And what we are going to do now is use one of them to beat the others with, for the sake of the greater good of making even attractive things better.

Or perhaps we are really discussing three writers, each a recognized star of his own particular creative generation, all three of them vigorous and inventive. One is an old pro, in addition to being as enthusiastic about life as anyone you know. One is an established veteran who is just settling in for the long haul, and the third is just beyond the stage of being a brilliant newcomer.

But perhaps we are looking at what makes a good story.

Cast back your mind to the September, 1957, issue of this magazine, and find there a novelette called "St. Dragon and the George," by Gordon R. Dickson. Do not go back and re-read it, fond though the memory be. Read, instead, this year's *The Dragon and the George*, by a matured Gordie Dickson, and weep, friend, tears of joy at this work, and sorrow that there is not more of it.

The book is available as a Nelson Doubleday item from the Science Fiction Book Club and as Bal-

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lantine Book # 345-25361 at $1.95. Go to it.

The premise of this marvelous fantasy is that there is a dragon-inhabited pseudomedieval parallel world in which humans are known as Georges and the dragons are heroic, though some of them are slow to realize that and others are outright frightening. Angie Farrell, a rather nice young lady, is translated into this world via an astral projection experiment gone wrong, and promptly grabbed up and imprisoned in the Loathly Tower. Her fiance, Jim Eckert, attempts to follow her, but winds up astrally projected into the body of a young dragon, Gorbash, the only tolerable relative of crusty old Smrgol, who is one of the best-characterized dragons in recent literature. Gorbash/Eckert now sets out in a picaresque trail of adventures which end in a genuinely menacing situation. Its resolution evokes enough tension and heroism to suit anybody who hasn't given up on himself. And not everybody lives happily ever after, although the ending is unquestionably a happy one.

It's a difficult story to put down. Gorbash wanders along, steered by Uncle Smrgol's sage advice, equipped with all a dragon's great physical powers, but totally possessed by Eckert, so that his knowledge of this world is nil. He makes friends and develops resources as he goes along, and even makes some intelligent improvements on dragon flight-technique. And in the end, when the Loathly Tower falls, his quest and his presence in the world have made a fundamental change in it.

Enroute, he has adventures humorous and not, physical and psychic, and triumphs and disasters. He befriends a knight, and the knight's damsel. He finds that Gorbash, when he was living alone in his head, was friends with an English — a very English — werewolf. And both Angie and Eckert are nicely human people; Angie is particularly drawn so well that we can see more about her than Eckert evidently can, and predict that marriage is going to be pepperier for him than he thinks.

It's all excellent fantasy-adventure writing. It would have been lost to us if Ballantine did not have Lester del Rey to encourage and develop book-length fantasy from some of our better contemporary authors, and if Gordie, old friends with Lester, hadn't brought up the idea of re-working "St. Dragon."

And it's more than "just" adventure writing. Eckert, and Gorbash, grow up on this journey from post-adolescence to primacy; we remember a little of what is good in us, from traveling with

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them. It's a basically simple tale, simply told, and appears to resemble real life as only the best fantasy can.

There is some hope of more work like this from Dickson. Will all of you please clap your hands as hard as you can.

A World Out of Time is Earth, as seen through the experiences of Jaybee Corbell, who is translated from one body to another not by astral projection but by Larry Niven, who is seen to be working very hard on this story.

Experienced Niven readers will find here all the things they have come to crave and expect: Idea built on idea at breathtaking speed, physical action over galactic distances and involving objects of ungraspable size, and no compromise with the reader; if you don't understand a concept the first time it goes by, you will never find it explained again.

Unusually, those Niven readers will find here a fair number of milieux they have experienced before: An ages-old ruined civilization, and an only superficially human stranded courtesan, from *Ringworld*; the time-stasis field from *World of Ptaava* et seq., and the anomaly that must be flown through at the galaxy's heart, from *Tales of Known Space* and other tales of Niven's justifiably well-known Known Space, of which this is not one.

Corbell is a corpsicle, or, rather, was one of the fatally diseased humans who were cryogenically entombed in hopes of revival in some future superworld. As it happens, Niven explains, that can't work; the freezing process destroys the ability of the glial cells to retain electric charges. But the world State in which Corbell first awakens does have a supply of brain-wiped criminals, into whose totally blanked brains the personalities of awakened individuals can be transferred. So Corbell awakes in a strange body. It is 2190 AD, and, as it's quickly explained to him, he owes society an enormous debt which he can repay only by piloting a sub-light ramship on a tour of several nearby solar systems, depositing terraforming catalysts which will make their planets human-habitable by the time the State needs them.

The alternative for Corbell is death, and the re-use of the criminal body for the impressed personality of yet another transmogrified Lazarus; sooner or later, the State will find someone both able and willing to spend the next several centuries alternately waking and spending most of his time in suspended animation between stars. Presented with that argument, Corbell buys the proposition,

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is hustled through training, and then steals the ship, of course, and heads for the galactic core so that he can gaze upon its glory before his body dies of old age.

But Peersa, his mentor for the State, beams his personality into the ship's computer, so that Corbell finds himself with Peersa for a constant companion. He also finds that the galactic core is collapsing; he flies through it and finds himself millions of years in the future as he approaches what may be the Solar System and a satellite of Jupiter that may be an altered Earth.

There he meets the courtesan, who is a mad crone in search of immortal youth, and then he encounters various people including the ruling class — immortal pre-adolescent boys — while searching for an adult immortality. He finds it — oddly enough, right where Richard S. Shaver, or Ray Palmer writing for Richard S. Shaver, said it would be — and he finds explanations for everything else, beds the revivified courtesan and lives happily ever after after after.

This is not a bad book at all, and we Niven fans may feel that at least eighty percent of our joy at a new volume has been justified. But topflight Niven it's not. It's better than *The Long Arm of Gil Hamilton* even though, like that one, this is chugged together from novelettes. The welds are smoother — or, rather, in this one, smoothed welds were thought necessary. In the previous book, Niven wanted the reader to see that he was as capable of ratiocination as he is of invention.

But the fact is that he is not. *World Out of Time* is full of maid-and-butler dialogue in which people explain things to each other that they already know, or that one of them is a dolt for not knowing. A prime example is the newly awakened Corbell explaining to Peersa how the State works, despite the fact that Corbell is specifically kept ignorant of the State's appurtenances.

And Niven almost convinces me later when Corbell offers some weak reasons for not allowing the Peersa/computer to clone him — and transfer his personality into the blank clone — when Corbell begins to grow very old on board the ramship. But he cannot prevent me from wondering why Corbell did not offer this immortality to the fanatic crone, and thus save himself a lot of bother. Nor am I happy that the Girls — who moved the Earth during an affray with the Boys — are kept offstage and dismissed with an "I guess none of them survived" the numerous mistakes Niven cites. He cites them to account for an Earth and a Solar System which he seems to have set

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up for the sole purpose of giving that weak explanation.

It's interesting to see the thematic parallels between this story and the Dickson, and to see how one of them, through simplicity and an *almost* naive faith in the verities, brings home those particular threads much more directly and effectively than Niven does with his tangled skein. I have to admire anyone who can think like Niven does. And when Niven sticks to thinking like Niven does, he is totally admirable. Hopefully, he is either finding out the natural bounds of his creative intelligence or will find some viable way to break out beyond their present shape. Then this good adventure story will be seen as a step on the way.

Joe Haldeman exemplifies all that is best about the new science fiction writers. Two steps beyond Dickson's generation, one beyond Niven's, he is educated in hard science yet very much aware of liberal arts academe, and equipped with considerable storytelling powers in addition to an ability to create dramatic ideas. That is not to say he's slicker and quicker than the Old Breed, whatever that is, but that even when he's mediocre he has a broad selection of resources to carry him over the doldrums.

Mindbridge follows on *The Forever War*, which established Haldeman's reputation in a flurry of critical acclaim and the Nebula award. In retrospect, *Forever War* had only one major extrapolative idea — war across Einsteinian distances at time-bending speeds — and the rest was good writing about human nature perceptively observed. The idea was not totally original with Haldeman, by a long jump, but his making a central theme of it was new enough.*

In contrast, *Mindbridge* has two central ideas, of which the first is totally original as far as I can determine; I was sorry to see it turn into a minor gimmick in support of the second. And not only does *Mindbridge* have two — no, come to think of it, somewhere near three — central ideas, it also has a pyrotechnical narrative technique. The result is less, not more, for all that it is an interesting less.

The not-quite idea is interstellar travel by The Levant-Meyer Translation, an effect discovered very early in the 21st century when a freak electrical discharge happened to hit an electron microscope focused on a crystal of calcium

**Just as immortality via matter-transmitter is no less legitimate for* Amazing *to have run it in the 1940s; it's simply piquant to note who it was that might technically claim precedence over Niven.*

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bromide. (In other words, the doshes were distimmed by the Dostak). The L-M Translation enables Earth to send suitably armored exploration teams to stars within a spherical area beginning about 10 light years from Earth and ending at 115 light years, the distance of Achernar. Objects picked up on these expeditions return ("slingshot") to their native places, without announcement, let, or hindrance, after a time, and Terrestrial objects taken to alien locations do the same. (The Dostak doshes the distims). This latter feature is a legitimate extrapolation of the original premise here, which is no wilder than the one Isaac Asimov used to get the little tailor from today's Earth to that of the Galactic Empire. Nevertheless, in actual fact the doshtak stims Dos mnrelm fdrk blb.*

The idea this leads us to, however, is Class A. The expedition to Groombridge 1618's second planet doesn't find much except mud and scrub, but it does come up with a small aquatic creature which, *when* touched by any two people, enables them to read each other's minds.

The creature has no plans or purposes of its own; it is simply a bridge, and is utterly passive. It does kill anyone who attempts to harm it, and it kills the first person to touch it. It kills them with a speed that varies inversely with their natural teleperceptive talent, and it is effective as a bridge in direct relation to the order in which various individuals have touched it, weighted by their natural teleperceptive talent. In order for the bridge to become useful, it must first be touched by someone for the valid suicide permit, and then touched by the two persons who are going to use it ... before it slingshots back, of course. And it is, as you can see, not a Sirius bridge; it is a Groombridge bridge. And it turns out, as noted, that the author's only real use for it in the story is to use it as a translation device when we encounter a truly vicious race of intellectually superior shape-changers.

So now we have two ideas which began clearly, showed immense dramatic possibilities, and were quickly foundered by auctorial second-thoughts, footnotes, loophole clauses, and elaborates which turn out to be hog-ties. Any attempt to develop them is thrown aside when it comes time to deal out the essentially dull old idea that we shall encounter an alien race which has no regard for us, is possessed of incredible cruelty, and moves with numbing swiftness to the attack. Too late — far too late — it turns out that this is not so. They're a wise old race that we've

*krelb

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misunderstood, and which has perhaps misunderstood us. But this twist on the idea, and a lame twist it is, comes after descriptions of physical damages that would sicken a connoisseur of packing plants. I can see what Haldeman intended, and its essential worth. I cannot see that he had his narrative under sufficient control to pull it off.

What *Mindbridge* is is a second novel,* and the number of good second novels in this field is quite small, especially when the first was well-received. There's a lot of pressure to be more inventive, more innovative, more "well-rounded" with one's talent; there is the search for one's limits, which of course goes on forever, but in the sophomore writer it tends toward a ringing denial of limits.

All to the good, really, in the long run. Haldeman we shall have with us for a nice long time, and grateful for it. One feature of *Mindbridge* stands out as a sign of great hope, and that is how well Haldeman has worked with the essentially clumsy pastiche technique. There is little straight narrative; we are given the contents of file folders, statistical summaries, historical anecdotes, bills of lading, etc., from which the narrative emerges. There are thus 53 chapters in this 186-page book. Thank God, two of them, entitled "Crystal Ball," exist to tie up such loose ends as the (completely irrelevant) reason for the existence of the bridges, and the (dramatically sterile) outcome of our contact with the L'vrai. If they didn't, these questions could never be answered. But with the rest of it, Haldeman has cobbled up a tense, reasonably consecutive, and often engagingly witty means of telling a story that would look much worse if laid out in a straight line. That's resourcefulness, and I am not being a wiseacre when I cite it, and appreciate it.

So it's interesting what we have here; three good books, two of them not as good as they should be, one of them actually not as good as it looks and saved from obvious trouble only by its author's technique.

What's technique for but to improve the telling of the story, you say? I could hardly argue, but that does leave the question of what story's for. In her introduction to *More Women of Wonder*, on which we will cast a generally sympathetic eye in our next column, Pamela Sargent says: "Literature has the tacit aim of improving us through imagination and understanding, by creating in our minds what we could not otherwise observe." I

*Third, but his first was non-SF, and apparently autobiographical.

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might wonder whether it necessarily should have that aim. I can hardly deny that in many quarters it does. What is interesting to me this month, aside from the fact that seldom lately have I encountered so much good reading over so short a span of time, is the fact that Dickson's fantasy seems very much the strongest.

Talking dragons aside, and talking dragons are not that unusual anymore, *The Dragon and the George* is the one that creates the least of what we have not hitherto observed; it treats, instead, of love, duty, and honor taken plain and taken seriously. It does it delightfully, believably, and in the end, movingly. I was not improved, but I was reminded of certain things I have cherished.

In the other two books, pleasurable though they were for long stretches of time, I was reminded mainly of the author at work. While reading the Dickson, I thought hardly at all about my very good friend and long-time roistering companion, though I certainly cheered him when I finally had time.

So perhaps we do have a clue to what story's for.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The Planet That Wasn't by Isaac Asimov, Doubleday, $7.95. This is the twelfth collection of Dr. Asimov's essays from this magazine. It contains seventeen articles in all, ranging from the December 1974 issue to April 1976 and including some of the more controversial pieces, such as "The Judo Argument" (April 1975) and "Thinking About Thinking" (January 1975).

Asimov's Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology, by Isaac Asimov, Avon Equinox, $5.95. A new, revised paperback edition of the reference book in which Dr. Asimov traces the history of science through the lives of the men and women who made it. 2,000 entries, 805 pages and a bargain.

The Compleat Feghoot by Grendel Briarton, introduction by Poul Anderson, Mirage Press, PO Box 7687, Baltimore, Md. 21207, $4.00. *All* the Feghoots are here, from the furry with a syringe on top to the chief who played the Tarzan's tripes forever. Tim Kirk's illustrations are perfect. (Mr. Briarton asks us to note that if you contributed a published Feghoot and did not receive a copy of this book, please write to him at PO Box 1481, Medford, OR 97501.)

—ELF

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Wilma Shore wrote "Is It the End of the World," (March 1972). Her new contribution is perhaps one of the most urban and contemporary ghost stories ever written.

The Podiatrist's Tale

by WILMA SHORE

"We have a ghost story," said a man standing in front of the fireplace. "We have this ghost story that happened to us."

It was the first time he had spoken. He was a doctor somebody, an ordinary-looking man, one of those people who, at a clever New York party, stand out precisely because they are so inconspicuous. Later they turn out to be the host's accountant, or a cousin from New Rochelle.

His wife sat forward on the couch. "Don't tell that story." She had to be his wife; like a male and female cardinal, the coloring was different but they were clearly a pair. "Nobody wants to hear all that stuff. Nobody's interested."

There was a short pause. "Of course we are!" said the host.

"We never told it before," said the doctor. "It's not the kind of thing ..." He looked at his wife. "But here, where everybody is discussing spiritual experiences — reincarnation, horoscopes, mantras ..."

"That's different," said his wife sharply. "That's the wisdom of the East. This is about the West Side."

She didn't mean it as a joke; when everyone laughed she got ruffled. She sat back, lips compressed. "Do what you like. It's your headache," she said, raising her eyes ostentatiously to the picture behind his head. It was a big putty-colored square, with a broad stroke of black and red near the bottom.

"Well, that's the thing." The doctor assumed a jocular expression. "If it's abroad, a Scotch castle, a country inn, fine. But an apartment house on upper Broadway? You hear someone at the door, you don't think ghost, you think breaking and entering. We didn't even think about it, we're so used to people in the hall. The two

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Gruen boys, across the way, in and out all day long. And the deliveries, the laundry — the Gruens leave their laundry in the hall, and the man comes and picks it up."

"And the dry cleaning," said his wife.

"And the dry cleaning. And whatever's going on in the hall, you hear it. But only from the hall," he added quickly, "not between apartments. It's an old house, very soundproof."

One of the men drained his glass and, holding it before him like a *laissez-passer*, went over to the bar. "Yes, sure," said the host.

"Sometimes people come out of the Gruen apartment and ring our bell; they think we're the elevator. That's mostly late at night, after a party, people have a few drinks —"

"For God's sake tell the story," said the host, with a chuckle.

The doctor pushed his eyeglasses higher on his nose. "I won't spin it out. I'll just give the facts. That's what I understand; I'm a medical man, not a storyteller."

"Right," said the host. "Just give us the facts."

"The facts are these." The doctor looked steadily at the host. "It first began — well, I can't say exactly when. It could have been going on and we didn't hear it. It's such a noisy corner, 78th and Broadway — the traffic, the Broadway bus, and then they were putting up the new house next door, the blasting, the drilling ..."

"I'll really kill you," said the host. "Don't tell about your corner, tell about the ghost. Was it a beautiful young woman? A knight with his head under his arm?"

"Oh, nothing like that," said the doctor modestly. "It was an old Jewish man."

There was a little pause. "Jews don't have ghosts," declared one of the women. Everybody looked at her, hoping it was a joke, but it wasn't. "That's true," she said defensively.

"Shut up, Gladys," said the host. "Let the man tell his Goddamn story."

"Are you sure it was a ghost?" said the hostess helpfully. "Maybe it was a real old man. On the wrong floor, maybe."

"That's what *I* thought," said the doctor. "I heard the doorknob rattle, I heard the door pushing in the door frame, and I thought, somebody trying to get in. But it was nobody. There was nobody there."

"If it was nobody," said Gladys shrewdly, "how do you know it was an old Jewish man?"

The doctor frowned. "Well, you see," he said, ill at ease, "I always, before I open up, I first look through the peephole. It's a good house, twenty-four-hour doorman,

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but why be a hero?" He looked back at the host, who nodded. "So I lift the peephole cover and I see this old man, holding the doorknob, pushing the door. But when I open the door —" he took a deep breath, "— the hall is empty."

Gladys leaned forward. "How long did it take you to open the door? He left while you were making up your mind to be a hero."

"He couldn't, you see," explained the doctor. "There's no place to go. No stairs, the stairs are in the back hall. He didn't go to the Gruens, because twice I went and asked, they looked at me like I was crazy. And if he took the elevator, the little light would be on, that shows if the elevator is in operation. Green for up, red for —"

Gladys threw herself back again, sighing. "Might it have been some trick of the light?" put in the hostess. "Perhaps a stain on the peephole?"

The doctor's wife turned. "Not on my peephole. The girl cleans it every week."

"So there was nobody *there*!" said Gladys. And as though she had proved her point, she looked from side to side, in search of another debate, another victory.

"There was, though," said the doctor. "I saw him. Not once. Not twice. Many times."

"I saw him too," said his wife. "Many, many times."

A second man drifted toward the bar. The host, scowling, watched him go. "Then how did you know he was Jewish?"

"I happened to know him," said the doctor. "He lived next door, in a brownstone. Until they tore it down, for the new building. They called him the rabbi. He wasn't really, they just called him that. He had a bottled water business. Siphons, you know? But retired. He used to sit out on the stoop, on a folding chair. If it was a nice day. He had this black felt hat, a black fedora —"

"Homburg," said his wife.

"Homburg. Black coat, well-brushed, shoes shined. Big black shoes, old man's shoes. If I was walking past I would nod, he would nod back. He was always there, if it was nice."

"Until they tore down the building," said his wife.

"Of course," he said irritably.

Gladys pounced. "So it *was* a real man!"

"Of course it was a real man," said the doctor. "But dead."

Everyone was listening, even the men at the bar. "Are you *sure*?" said the host.

"The funeral was over on Amsterdam," said the doctor. "The whole neighborhood attended, but I had office hours. What

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happened, he went to live with his daughter when they tore down his brownstone, and then he died. Heart, I think."

"Heart," said his wife. There was a little silence.

"The hardest part of all," went on the doctor, "is for instance take me, I treat disorders of the foot. Podiatry, a scientific discipline. I observe the foot, I touch the foot, I diagnose from the evidence of my senses. I *believe* my senses. That's my training, that's the approach of my whole generation. Materialists. I pride myself on being a rational human being. But how could you explain it rationally? Either it was a ghost or we were both crazy. *Folie a deux*, it's called."

The host opened his mouth to speak but the doctor held up his hand. "So all right, stipulate that you have a bona fide ghost. Then you only have another mystery on your hands. A ghost is from some terrible tragedy, right? Some wrong to be righted, some crime to be avenged. What tragedy? What crime? And why come to us? How did we fit into the picture?"

"We weren't even the same *building*!" cried his wife. "A ghost is supposed to haunt where he lived!"

The doctor raised his voice. "There was no building! How could he haunt a nonexistent premises?" It sounded like an old argument.

"And you're so sure it was only us!" said his wife. "He could have been going to every apartment —"

"Break it up!" said the host.

She sat back again. "Ridiculous. Nobody wants to hear such an idiotic —"

But the doctor continued. "There was considerable tension. There was intermittent, spasmodic fear. Physical fatigue from interrupted sleep. At midnight the door rattles, at three in the morning the door rattles, six in the morning it starts again. There was shame, for being so crazy, having such a delusion. We stopped socializing, having people over. What if they heard it too? Worse — what if they didn't? The more we tried to rise above it, the deeper in we sank. All day I thought, delusional! And the minute I get home I listen for it. The minute I hear it I have to jump up, whatever I'm doing, run and look through the peephole. Did he fade away, little by little? Did he simply vanish, like you turn off a light? I wanted to know, but I didn't. When I saw him I would drop the peephole cover. I had like a cold chill through my body —"

"You weren't the only one," said the wife. "I felt this sensation from being completely frozen, like transfixed."

For the first time the doctor turned from the host and looked around at the faces lifted toward

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him. "One night I get home, I find my wife at the ragged edge. I should please take down the suitcases, we're going to sleep at a hotel. We're standing there, knocking it around, and I hear the door rattle. I go and open the peephole. But this time I hold up the cover with my both hands. I look out. I see the hat, the beard, the shoulder. I'm shaking, but I can't drop the cover, I'm pressing it hard against the door. And suddenly he turns his head and looks into my eyes."

Nobody moved. Smoke from someone's cigarette rose up in a straight line. "Not into my eyes, really, only at the door, but my eye is there, so he looks into my eye. With such a look! Sad. Hopeless. I felt — like soft inside." He swallowed. "And I had this insight. I pulled open the door. The eyes; I knew the eyes. From my grandpa, when I was a kid. If I was sneaking a smoke in the bathroom, he would come and knock on the door. I would run the water loud, not to hear him; I would think, *he went away.* But when I came out he would be standing there." He opened his eyes wide. "*'Oh, Grandpa, I didn't know —'*

His wife was sitting forward, watching him intently. "I held the door, stood aside, and he went by. I couldn't see him, but I could smell the old man smell. Of oldness, of cigar smoke, of shoe polish .... Because I had this insight," he said quietly. "A ghost, an *old* ghost, condemned to wander, day after day, night after night, what would he want? He would want to go —"

His wife broke in. "To the facilities."

"To the facilities. So from then on, whenever we were home, I unlocked the door. And I stopped being frightened. How could you be frightened of an old man who only needed to use —"

"— the facilities."

"Facilities. A few months later when they opened the new building for occupancy, I locked the door again. And nothing. Finished. That was the end of our ghost."

In the silence he took off his glasses and wiped them painstakingly with his folded handkerchief, head bowed; the effect was of a performer modestly taking a curtain call. Then he tucked the handkerchief neatly in his breast pocket and put his glasses on again. "So that's our ghost story," he said, looking around.

But something had gone wrong. There was no curtain call, there was no audience. Suddenly everyone had gotten busy taking a drink, lighting a cigarette; nobody was looking at him except his wife. She sat on the couch, staring at him in stony triumph.

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A suspenseful tale about a trader named Bolin — the only living human on a planet covered with vines that were carnivorous and even more dangerous in a way Bolin had not yet figured out ...

Daughter Of The Vine

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

Bolin watched the green landscape tilt under him. A blast of braking rockets shoved him deep into bubble-foam. A metallic voice blared:

"LEAVE CAPSULE IMMEDIATELY! YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES TO CLEAR LANDING ZONE!"

Bolin broke the seal on the airlock and jumped down onto blackened duroplast. A cargo lock at the bottom of the capsule began burping out square plastic crates.

"FOUR MINUTES TO CLEAR LANDING ZONE!!"

Stiffly, Bolin hoisted a box and stumbled to the raised ring at the edge of the blast zone. He loped back and grabbed another as the speaker crackled:

"THREE MINUTES TO CLEAR!"

He puffed as he pushed the third crate over the rim. The air of Gax was like breathing wet cotton. Some of the crates were too big to get his arms around, and so he had to walk them along on their corners.

Four left. The cargo lock wheezed shut. The speaker blared: "TWO MINUTES TO CLEAR!" A siren shrieked: "Whoo-UP! Whoo-UP!" Rage curdled in Bolin's stomach as he wrestled two more crates to the edge. The speaker roared:

"ONE MINUTE! ONE MINUTE! STAND CLEAR!"

The siren ceased whooping and began to emit a strangled screech. Bolin grated his teeth and snaked one of the two remaining crates out from under the capsule. He got the other crate behind it, bent into a crouch, and shouldered the pair away from the rumbling vehicle. He gave them a final kick over the rim and stood panting as fire bloomed at the base of the vehicle. It lifted, wobbled, then shot up through the

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purple stratosphere.

Bolin climbed onto a crate and surveyed the flat green horizon. The dull gray dome of the trading station shimmered in heat warp a quarter mile away. He trudged toward it, leaving the crates behind. A vine clawed at his boot, peeled off as he kicked, then lashed back to trap his ankles. He put out one hand to catch himself and found his wrist trapped in a wiry, barbed tendril. He hissed with pain as he tore it loose. Ruby droplets braceleted his wrist where the barbs had torn his flesh.

Bolin cursed, jerked out his blaster, and fired a cone of heat on the writhing tendrils. The vines shriveled and curled back. Bolin moved forward in half steps, burning a track down to the purple soil. The vines hissed and popped; a fragrant cloud of vapor enveloped him. He felt something slither down inside his boot and writhe up under his cuff. He yelped as pain needled his calf. He whirled, charring a perimeter of gray ash around where he stood. He barely had time to jerk up his cuff and rip the severed creeper out of his calf before the vines started closing in again.

No use going on. The charge in his blaster would go dead before he got halfway to the dome — and so, a short time later, would he.

He burned his way back to the LZ and examined the pile of cargo. One crate was marked: *Nutrient.* All the rest were stamped: *Survival Materials.* He broke one open and found it full of square plastic bottles marked, *VINE REPELLENT — Spray on garments and exposed skin surfaces.* Bolin uncapped the bomb, sprayed it on his boots and coveralls, then doused his palms and smeared it on his face and hands. He pocketed two extra bottles and set off again toward the dome. This time the vines touched his boots and whipped back, their leaves turning yellow. Bolin wondered if that could explain the disappearance of the trader. Possibly he'd gotten caught out without repellent...

A sudden loneliness struck him, primed by the realization that he was probably the only living human on the planet. Subjectively, less than an hour had passed since he'd taken the life-suspension chemicals and crawled into the sleeper capsule. Actually eight months had gone by, and the nearest manned trading station lay four light-years behind him in the direction of the Hub.

Sweat slushed inside his boots by the time he reached the dome. Vines matted the ground right up to the gray hemisphere, violating the ITC ruling that a twenty-yard perimeter be kept sterilized around each station. He tromped around

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the dome, flattening the vines with short heat-bursts. They grew thicker near the entrance...

He stopped and stared. It was not a door in the standard sense, but an iris made of overlapping durillium sheets. One sheet was bent outward, jamming the iris in a half-open position. Bolin examined the sheet and felt his skin prickle. Heat had not warped the panel, but force, so powerful that not even the strongest metal devised by science could withstand it.

Holding his blaster in front of him, he squeezed through the hole. Purple dust filmed every surface. He stood alert, listening to silence, while his senses groped for the aura which humans leave behind in their habitations. The presence usually lingered long after food smells and body odors faded — but it was gone from here. Bolin had a feeling that nothing had moved inside the station since the trader had sent that last message back to Eros.

Bolin walked to the semicircular bank of instruments which occupied the place of honor in the center of the dome. He blew dust off the sensitized plate and read:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I divorced old barren reason from my bed,

And took the daughter of the vine to spouse.

A'hmed ben Abdul

"Could be saying he lost his mind," mused Bolin. "Trouble is, you're supposed to feel saner, the nuttier you get."

He lowered himself into the swivel seat, pressed the *clear* button, and watched the verse fade from the plate. The amber *ready-to-send* light gave him a feeling of comfort, security. The comm-console was his only link to the universe of men...

He flexed his fingers — slight stiffness in his right hand, the one nipped by the vine — and tapped out the sending code:

To: Bern Stelke
Chief Expeditor
Hq, Interstallar Trading Corp.
Veris 5

From: Carr Bolin
Expeditor - 7
Gax

Chief: Greetings from the garden planet of Gax. The damn vines nearly ate me alive. Station abandoned, trader Abdul missing. Proceeding with investigation. Send all available data on life-cycle of carnivorous vine which surrounds station. Also predators and native cultures, if any. Bolin.

He pressed the *send* button and watched the message fade. His throat felt dry. He walked through the arch leading to the trader's quarters, boots grating loud on dusty duroplast. Blowing dust off

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the food-synthesizer, he pressed a button marked W and watched a chalky liquid dribble into a plastic cup. He lifted it to his lips and sipped. Lukewarm and bitter — worse than the usual station fare...

A face was peering out through the window of the cold-storage cubicle. Bolin choked and spewed out a cloud of droplets. Then he laughed.

"Hell — The Annie. Forgot all about her."

He turned the latch and slid back the door. The female figure was nude, doubled up in fetal position, with hoarfrost rimming her long lashes. He dragged the frozen body out on the floor and tipped it onto its side. Peeling down the skin flap between the shoulder blades, he read the blue-stenciled printing:

Heat to 120 degrees. This activates brain, which activates other organs. Skin temperature cools to human norm of 98.6. Internal temperature remains at optimum 105 degrees. Caution: Importation of Comfort Androids to human-occupied worlds punishable by fine of 5000 G.M.U. (Galactic Monetary Units), under provisions of APCROW (Amendment to Protect the Conjugal Rights of Organic Women.)

Bolin shoved her in the oven and turned up the heat. Hoarfrost melted down her cheeks. Her eyes were large, deep brown. They blinked. The head turned. The full sensuous lips moved...

Bolin switched off the oven and opened the door. She slid out feet-first, stretched her arms, then pressed her fingertips together and bowed:

"Salaam Aleichum, es sidi."

—Breasts about twice the size Bolin considered normal, cherry-tipped, quivered like two giant bowls of custard. Her waist pinched to an impossible handspan, then flared out to wide hips and heavy thighs. The hair on her head was a lustrous burgundy-red, but the pubic patch did not match, being brick-orange in color, a triangle so neatly defined it might have been drawn with a ruler.

Bolin spoke in the clipped monotone he customarily used on androids: "You speak English?"

"I have all the languages, honored human sir."

"Good. Tell me what happened to trader Ahmed."

Her brown eyes went wide. "He is not here?"

"Hasn't been for months, to judge by the dust. When did he shut you off?"

"Galactic year 233. Month 11. Day 5. Hour 22. Minute 37—"

"That's close enough. Come with me."

He strode back into the main dome, walked to the comm-con-

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sole, and opened a panel at the base of the machine. Unreeling a meter of readout tape, he scanned the coded symbols.

"Here it is. Just ten hours before he shut you off, he sent this message: 'Send RQDT for cargo pickup. Also ship ten cases vine repellent. Priority urgent. Abdul, Trader four.' You recall him sending the message?"

No answer. He looked around and saw large tears sliding down her round olive cheeks, splashing onto her breasts.

"Why are you doing that?"

"Honored human sir — my lover is gone. You expect me to dance and sing?"

"No. Just respond to my questions." He frowned. "You actually feel grief?"

"Of course. I am programmed to care."

"Ummm, yes. I guess you would be. Well, getting back to Ahmed..." He patted his pockets and pulled out the notes he'd scribbled when he was given the assignment. "The robot quantum drive transport was dispatched immediately and arrived here twenty-four hours later. It remained on the landing zone for one rotation of the planet, then took off again as programmed. Upon arrival at the distribution center the sealed ship was found empty. Inquiries beamed to the station here were not acknowledged. What can you tell me about this?"

She put her face in her hands and sobbed. Bolin regarded her in disgust. "How long does this go on?"

"After about ten hours it tapers off," she said, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her hand. "Then I transfer my affection to the new trader. You, honored human sir—"

"Hold it now. First, let's drop the honored human business. Takes too much time. Also I'm not a trader, I'm an expeditor. I don't use comfort androids — or cockannies if you prefer the popular term. Not that I disapprove of traders who use them. Seven years on a nonhumanoid world, a man needs *something*. But I'm only staying until I get the cargo moving again. And I get a bonus for quick solutions, you see? So I don't need distractions."

She stood with her head bowed, her hands folded behind her. Bolin felt suddenly foolish, having wasted his time explaining to an android. She was engineered so realistically that he tended to forget.

"All right. The disappearance of trader Abdul. What can you tell me about it?"

"Nothing, honored human sir. He was here when he deactivated me."

"That's a great deal of help."

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"I am here to be of service."

"I was being sarcastic, forget it. Had he already gathered his cargo when he deactivated you?"

"He had gathered a great pile of the shiny red fruit, but I do not know what makes a cargo."

"Which vine produces the Gax-nut?"

"All of them, sir. They are all the same."

"Bloodthirsty bastards. No wonder he needed so much repellent. Did he run out of it."

"Not while I was activated, sir."

"All right. Let's try to get a progression of events. Did his behavior change toward the end?"

"Yes. He no longer called me his kumquat blossom."

"Explain that."

"We had a game. He ran around the room buzzing, and I assumed the posture of a flower. But that was before he ate the fruit of Gax."

"He *ate* it?"

"Only a nibble. He spat it out and said it was bitter."

"I see. And then his behavior changed?"

"Yes. He no longer desired me."

"He *said* that?"

"There was no need, honored human sir. I am keyed to respond to my master's desire; my nipples rise and I exude a generous flow of coital fluid..."

He watched her left nipple swell out—

"Very interesting..."

—there was a softening around her mouth, a tilt to her pelvis...

"You can discontinue the demonstration."

"I do not control the programming, honored human sir. I state again, I am keyed to respond..."

Her hips began a smooth rotation, seeming to pivot on the rose-ivory cup of her navel. It took him a few seconds to recall that her movement was powered by an atomic node buried one inch behind her sternum.

"Well, if you're getting it from me, it doesn't mean anything. My glands have been in stasis for eight months, and they aren't back in balance yet. Now, about Ahmed. He ate the fruit and you quit playing bumblebee together. What *did* he do?"

Her nipples retracted. "He worked very hard gathering the nuts."

"And—"

"And after he sent the message, he had nothing to do. He s-sat in the storage room f-f-feeling the fruits—"

Tears flowed in a stream down her cheeks. Bolin screwed up his patience and waited. It was a universal trait of androids, to exaggerate human emotion to the point of bathos.

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"All right," he said after ten seconds. "Ahmed gathered his cargo, then sat feeling the fruit. And you did ... what?"

"I did everything I knew to distract him. I sang, I danced, in my most seductive manner. I will show you...."

"Never mind. It's irrelevant."

"Ahmed said that too. Then he ordered me to shut myself off. I had to obey."

"And then he went out into the vines?"

"I do not know sir."

"Possibly he just went native. Is there a settlement near here?"

"Sir ... come."

Bolin followed her up the spiral ladder to the top of the dome, pushed open the lock, and stepped out onto the observation deck. Here, fifty feet above the ground, he had a view of the horizon for at least ten miles. He saw neither house nor temple nor cairn of rocks, no trees or bushes, no mammals, reptiles or amphibians, no grazers or runners, or creepers or gliders. Vines covered each rock and ridge in an unbroken sea which did not ripple in the wind but rather quivered like a vast bowl of gelatin.

"Is it all like this?"

"All that I have seen, sir. And I have gone out with Ahmed in the grav-sled to gather nuts."

Bolin felt a tingle of alarm. "Run down and see if it's still here."

She left, and he found himself standing in a muffled cocoon of silence. Not a churrup, not a peep, not a grunt. As if a soundproof green blanket had been thrown over the world.

"The sled is there, sir."

Bolin relaxed and scanned the compacted green mass around the dome. "If he went into that on foot—" He broke off as a tentacle shot out of the vines and pasted itself against the dome with a sound like a wet dishrag. It drew back like a cocked hammer, then threw itself up in another twelve-feet leap. Suction cups caught the slick surface while it curved up into a hump, then curled back for a final thrust which would carry it to the platform. Bolin drew his blaster and fired. The charred stub of the tentacle fell back into the vines.

"Funny," he said, dropping his gun back in the holster. "Those vines in the field had barbs. This has suction cups. I can't see any reason for them except to climb the dome. Have the vines done this before?"

"No, sir. And it is much larger than before?"

"Hmmm. Why do you keep saying 'it'? There must be thousands of vines."

"Yes, sir. But that is far away. Near the dome there is only one."

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He squinted out over the green sea and saw that there was, indeed, a color change beginning about four miles out. He unfolded his field glasses and studied the transition area. The unbroken matrix gradually gave way to cup-shaped depressions scalloped and raised on the edge, like an endless mosaic of lily pads.

"You say its growing? I wonder how fast...."

He peered over the bulge of the dome and noticed a seething writhing movement converging toward the entrance. Bolin drew his blaster and ran down the steps, only to be attacked by a pseudopod spiraling up the railing like a snake. He fired a cone of high heat, and the vine shriveled and dropped to the floor with a husklike rattle. He reached the foot of the staircase and saw other tendrils oozing through the portal in a tight compacted mass. They spread out over the floor like a flood of green eels. Bolin set the heat-gun on sustaining and scorched his way to the door. He turned the heat up to max and played it on the door panels until they glowed red. The tendrils sizzled, popped, and began sucking themselves back out. Some were burned through and dropped inside. Bolin was relieved to see that they became lifeless after being cut off from the stem.

He dabbed at the sweat and turned to see the CA standing at the foot of the stairway, her face full of concern.

"Get me a hammer and tongs from the repair cabinet," he ordered.

She brought them, and he pounded the warped panel straight before it cooled to rigidity. He felt safer when the iris pinched down to a pinpoint of light and winked out.

But his hand stung. Red pimples rose on his knuckles where the vine had lashed him. He decided to carry a repellent bomb at all times...

"My god, the repellent! I left it on the LZ!"

He ran across the dusty floor and entered the storage shed. The grav-sled sat on its four landing runners in front of the closed cargo lock. Behind it stretched the long pod of the cargo trailer, like a cylinder sawed lengthwise in half. It had its own elevator jets, but no thrust engine or steering apparatus.

Bolin glanced into the trailer and saw that it was empty. So were the storage bins along the wall.

That stopped him. "Hey! Annie!"

The CA came through the door, breasts quivering. "Yes, sir."

"You said Ahmed had gathered his cargo."

"He had filled all of the bins —"

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"Look at them. Every last one — Empty."

She walked over and looked into one. Then into another. Then into a third....

Bolin sighed and climbed into the bubble-cockpit. He punched the starter button and was relieved to hear a rush of air from beneath the sled. He tugged on the elevator lever and felt it rise off the floor. Glancing back, he saw the trailer also aloft. One thing about ITC field equipment, it was built to last.

"Annie, I'm going after the repellent. You might as well turn yourself off."

She walked to the sled and lifted up her oval wistful face. "Sir — have you no further use for me? I can cook, clean, play cards, sing, recite verse, dance —"

"All right. Clean up the station. I'll be right back."

He tapped out the code and watched the durillium panel slide silently up on graphite-oiled bearings. A solid wall of greenery hung momentarily suspended, then bulged toward him in a writhing mass of feelers and tendrils. Bolin gasped and jabbed a firing stud. Fire bloomed from the heat-cannon in the nose. A channel of white ash stretched twenty feet into the vines. He flew out and shut the lock behind him.

He was almost too late reaching the landing pad. The vines must have invaded as soon as the blast area cooled; only two boxes remained beside the rim. The others were being dragged, pushed, pulled and tugged by thousands of ropy tentacles. One was already a hundred yards away and moving at a fast walk. Bolin hovered over it until his heat exhaust forced the vines to retreat, then he jumped out and threw the crate into his trailer.

He flew low on his return, leaning out of the bubble to watch his airblast stir the clotted leaves. He was looking for a set of bleached bones, in case trader Ahmed had tried to reach the LZ on foot....

But — nothing. Maybe the vine consumed all. By now the light had faded to a dim lavender, and the giant sun showed only a thin slice of smoky red on the horizon.

He flew inside the cargo lock and landed, deciding to unload the sled later. He walked into the dome and saw the CA on her hands and knees dusting under the comm-console.

God, he felt horny! He walked stiff-legged across the gritty floor, his eyes fixed on her rump, glowing like a pair of pale gibbous moons....

She rose and turned to face him, dust coating each ruby nipple. Desire went out of him like air from a punctured baloon.

"Sorry, Annie. False alarm."

She kept coming. Pnuematic

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softnesses pressed against his chest.

"Back! I'm not interested."

She stepped back, looking hurt. "Sir, I cannot help my programming. I sensed your desire...."

"I know. But it's not real. It has something to do with the vines. Did Ahmed act this way?"

"Always — when he came in from the vines."

"And you —"

"I did what I am made to do."

— with a slight roll of her wide, soft hips.

"And yet he shut you off."

"Yes, sir." Tears brimmed in her eyes.

"How can you cry for Abdul and be on the make for me at the same time?"

"It is the same thing, sir."

"How?"

"I have an anxiety sequence, as a safeguard against failure. I was created to keep traders from being lonely."

"I see. So when Ahmed went into the farnooney, you figured it was your fault?"

Wordlessly, she began weeping again. Bolin left her and went into the shower. He put on clean shorts more appropriate to the humid heat of Gax and ordered supper.

She served him a bowl of mucuslike gruel filled with clots of raw protein. The bread was full of uncooked yeast nodules. He pushed it away and ordered a brandy. She twiddled the dials on the beverage synthesizer and drained out a glassful of scummy, yellowish liquid. It tasted like a musty sweat shirt.

"Annie — don't you have *any* skills?"

"Sir — there was only one skill Ahmed required of me."

He looked at her thoughtfully, sensing a connection between Ahmed's passion and his final disappearance. But he couldn't pin it down.

"He didn't call you Annie, did he?"

"No, sir. He called me Fatima."

"Accent on the first syllable, eh?"

He thought the pun too subtle, but the CA gave him a look of gentle reprimand. "Sir, if you do not like my shape, why don't you change it?"

"Can I do that? How?"

"Your words will key the changes into my matrix. You have to express...."

"Oh. Okay. I think you might start by taking a few inches off the ... uh, front. They sort of get in your way. And in the back ... turn around please." He studied the broad rump which she turned for his inspection. "You could reduce there too. I'm partial to tall, slim types. Also I think it would help if you put something on."

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"Something?"

"Clothes. Didn't Ahmed ever have you wear clothes?"

"Yes, sir. The changes will take an hour. Then will you be wanting me for bed?"

"No, Annie. I'm going to sleep. One other thing—" He burped up a taste of synthetic protein. "—while you're into your matrix, hype up your cooking skills a little. Good night. Wake me when it gets light."

He slept poorly. Erotic dreams reached the level of torment, and once he awoke to find Annie kneeling beside him with a glass of water. Bolin swallowed it and lay back. "Thanks. I'll sleep now."

She went out, and Bolin closed his eyes. The dreams returned, delicious erotic writhings which made him twist and moan. Soft fragrant limbs entwinded his body, squeezing the breath out of him. He thought if he could find its head he could tell it to stop because it was killing him.

The head belonged to Annie. She was on the mat with him, her arms and legs entrapping him, her flesh clinging like adhesive cloth.

He pushed her away. "Did something happen to your obedience circuit?"

"You called, sir."

"Next time I call, don't come. I'm just dreaming. Now depart."

She left. Bolin drew his sleeping pad around him. After a long time he drifted into dreamless slumber.

He awoke to the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Annie knelt beside his pad, holding a steaming cup in both hands. He sipped the pungent brew and nodded.

"Excellent." He lay back and studied her. She wore a red satin vest which left her neat conic breasts bare. Transparent pajamas clung to her slim hips about a handspan below her navel.

"Exactly what I had in mind," he said.

She gave him a radiant smile. "Would you like to try it out?"

He glanced down at the sheet which covered the lower half of his body. All night it had stood up like a circus tent. Now it lay flat as a tablecloth.

"Apparently I wouldn't," he said.

"Perhaps my skin texture is wrong. Would you test it?"

He trailed his hand over her satin thigh. Recalling his nightlong torment, he felt tempted to sample the techniques of her computerized brain. No doubt those slender hips could shuttle like a hummingbird's wing ...

He glanced out through the door of his sleeping cubicle. The interior of the dome was still dark.

"Hey! I told you not to wake me until it got light."

"It *is* light, sir — above the vines."

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He leaped off the mat and ran into the main section. Vines completely covered the dome, permitting only a few rays of green-hued light to drift down. Bolin filled a portable tank with repellent and loaded it in the grav-sled, then flew over the dome and sprayed it until the vines curled and peeled off. He saturated a twenty-foot strip of soil around the dome before his tank went dry.

Sweating from his efforts, Bolin read the stamping on an empty bottle and saw that the repellent was supposed to last 200 hours. What had gone wrong?

Inspection of the plants around the perimeter gave him the answer. Air bladders beneath the leaves stored warmth during the day and released it in the cool predawn hours. The result was a soupy groundfog which hid all surface features under a twenty-foot layer of cotton-wool. It had also washed away the repellent he'd sprayed on the dome.

He breakfasted on Eggs Alderbaran, Canisberry pancakes, and toasted bread sprinkled with Altairian spices. All were delicious.

"Keep an eye on the station," he told her as he climbed into the grav-sled. "I'm going out to survey the area."

He flew out beyond the perimeter of the supervine before reducing altitude. The individual vines were about thirty feet across, with raised borders shading to brown, like the crust of a pie. He dropped to five feet and saw his first Gax-nut — a ruby richness glowing under the spreading umbrella stalk of the central stem.

Spraying himself with repellent, he strapped on the harvesting knife — a broad straight three-foot blade with a sharp crescent hook on the end.

The vines seemed to recoil as he landed the sled. The moment he stepped to the ground, they struck his boots like poisonous adders. Bolin thrust his blade under the umbrella stalk, hooked the curved tip around the stem of the oval fruit, and jerked. Crimson juice spurted from the severed stump. The ruby nut rolled out to rest against his boot.

Suddenly the air was full of lashing tentacles. They plucked at his shirt and coiled around his legs. He grabbed the nut and ran back to the grav-sled, just as the plant flattened out and turned the pale underside of its leaves toward the sky.

Bolin, about to drop the nut into the cargo trailer, looked at his face reflected deep within its waxy surface. He felt a warm flowing in his loins which could only be called desire. He wanted to embrace that incredibily beautiful, seductive, sweet, loving — umbrella stalk.

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He dropped the nut quickly and wiped his hands on his coveralls. He felt a glimmer of sympathy for Ahmed. If a mere touch could inflict such strong desire, what would happen to a man who ate one?

He tried to walk to the next plant, but was stopped by a waist-high barrier of needle-sharp thorns. He flew a hundred yards away and set down again. This plant yielded an oval fruit twice as large as the first, but dull green in color. When he cut the stem, the vine gave only a slight shudder and a sigh.

The next three plants yielded two green nuts apiece, and the fourth — after much writhing, gushing and sighing, gave up a pair of blushing red twins. When he returned to the grav-sled, he found it trapped by thousands of wiry filaments which looped over its top and burrowed into the ground on the other side. He drew his blaster and burned his way into the pilot's seat; the vines clung until he'd charred the earth beneath him to a cinder; then they fell away and let him rise.

The next plant held two wrinkled brown cylinders which broke off their stems without resistance. The next one surrendered a round, pink-white ball. It's substance was soft and rubbery, and it retained the shape of his fingers for ten seconds after he squeezed it. It gave him the queasy sensation of touching human flesh. He dropped it into the trailer and turned away, but a movement caught his eye....

The ball was crawling ... oozing, flowing across the cargo trailer like an animated lump of bread dough. It reached the opposite end and tried to flow up the wall, then fell back and went quiescent.

Bolin flew a hundred yards to the next plant. It held a red nut, but the vines began whipping up and thumping against the bottom of his cockpit the moment he started to settle. Almost as if he'd been expected....

This time he flew a mile before setting down. He hacked off a second doughball without trouble and set it gently on the floor of the trailer. It oozed across the floor and started up the sloping side, fell back, and started up again. He glanced at the opposite end of the trailer and saw the other doughball performing the same exercise. Both seemed to be drawn in the same direction.

He took off and flew until he found another red nut. He managed to hack it off, but a ropy tendril coiled around his neck and chocked off his air. He gasped and watched the purple sky turn black....

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He clawed out his blaster and thumbed it onto max. Aiming blindly in the direction of the central stem, he pressed the firing stud and held it down until the strangling presence fell away from his throat. The central plant collapsed in a hissing, bubbling pool of slime....

He jumped into the grav-sled and took off. At fifty he leveled off and tried to figure why the vine had turned so vicious. He felt a sudden retrospective fear. Death had been only seconds away. Sweat streamed out of his pores, soaked his coveralls....*Oh hell, that's what happened! The sweat washed off the repellent...*

He got out the bottle to apply more, then realized how unbearably *hot* it was. There was no wind, and the shimmering red ball of Gax stood high in the western sky. His eyelids burned from the reflected glare of sunlight off the vapor curling up from the vines.

He climbed to a thousand feet and bent the sled in a wide circle, enjoying the breeze as he looked for the station. After a long time he saw a round hump of greenery the exact size and shape of the trader's dome. By the Great Nonentity! The vine was smothering her...

He swooped down and made a low pass over the dome, peeling back the vines with his heat exhaust. Then he charred a thirty-foot strip around the dome.

The CA met him as he came in through the cargo lock. She held out a glass of amber liquid beaded with sweat droplets. He swallowed the cool musty liquid and belched.

"Ghidellian beer. You're getting good, Annie."

She smiled and walked to the trailer with a rocking-horse motion of her slender hips. Bolin felt a sudden urge to test the texture of her rose-tinted rump through the gauze.

"You picked the wrong fruits, sir."

"I know." He walked up beside her and looked down into the cargo trailer. "I kept one of each: a green melon, a red nut, a brown stick and a doughball. These must be life stages of the vine — like blossoms, buds, fruit ... and some fourth stage I can't identify. We'll plant them and see what happens."

She helped him fill four plastic pails with dirt and carry them inside the station. Only the stick-object seemed to settle in and look natural. The green nut sat as neutral as a stone. The doughball kept rolling out, until Bolin devised a wire-mesh cage which fit over the pail. The red fruit he accidentally punctured with his thumbnail. A caramel sap oozed out and filled the air with a sensuous fragrance.

Bolin sprayed repellent on the

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floor around the buckets, then went into the shower cubicle and let the drenching spray cool his body.

When he came out, the CA met him with a towel. Bolin turned his back and felt the brisk invigorating nap scoring his back. Abruptly it changed to a silky texture. She was drying him with her hair ....

"Hmmm. Did Ahmed teach you that?"

"No, sir. I am keyed to respond to your desire."

She dropped to her knees, and the texture of her touch changed again. After a minute Bolin burst out laughing...

"This is ridiculous, getting a knob job from a robot."

She stood up and looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"Now don't start that, for God's sake. You don't really care."

"Sir! We are programmed to care. I loved Ahmed and now I love you. I would do anything for you. I would die for you but I know you would not wish to be charged 2,550 GMUs for my loss. How can you say I don't care?"

"Like this: You don't care."

She blinked in puzzlement. "Sir — I will dance for you. The seven veils. Ahmed used to love—"

"Forget it. This has something to do with the vine. I feel nothing for you, absolutely nothing. Now don't trip off your anxiety sequence. There's nothing you can do, and I'm not about to give myself to the vine. It's just that right now..."

"What, sir?"

"I just had a warm, cozy feeling, like I'd like to go out and snuggle up in the vines."

Her eyes widened. "Have you been eating the fruits, sir?"

"No, but it might be a way of finding out what happened to Ahmed."

"Sir —!" Her voice rose in alarm. "I have supper prepared. You must eat. Then you will sleep. And tomorrow you will wear nose plugs when you go into the field."

She served gravy and breast of vesperduck, Regellian quail and Alderbaran red caviar, Xanteean drumsticks covered with dark ulluri sauce, and a bowl of steaming Gallardian curry.

"My compliments to your programmer," he said as she removed the plates and dropped them into the recycler. "I could never get the stuff to taste like anything but yeast, fats, and protein dust mixed with water. Which of course it is."

She dialed a green liquid which looked and tasted like fifty-year-old Pellian brandy. He inhaled the bouquet from the bell-shaped glass and regarded her over the rim:

"That idea about nose plugs — did you suggest it to Ahmed?"

"No, sir. I just thought of it."

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"Your intelligence seems to be improving."

"In response to your desire, sir."

"Is that it?" He slid back his chair and yawned. "Well, don't get too smart. I'm going to bed now — to sleep."

"As you wish, sir."

...Sleep was a little red fox which kept eluding him in the slithering jungle of sensuality. Writhing and twisting, he called out at last for the CA to come poultice the pulsing organ of desire...

It deflated as soon as she touched him.

"Forget it, Annie. It has nothing to do with you."

...Next he dreamed of an odd, bell-shaped cairn of rocks rising from a sea of vines. A brown face peered from a cleft, the eyes strangely fixated. The dream slid, dissolved into a sickening slime of nightmare...

He woke up sweating. Annie appeared with coffee covered by foamy cream. In the bottom of the cup, a delicious mixture of malt and alcohol ....

"There is a green light on your talk-box, sir."

"Green? That's probably a report on the vines. Get it, will you? Open the compartment under the speaker and bring that little roll of tape."

She came back in a minute with the tape. Bolin tried to unroll it, but the fingers of his right hand were thick, puffy and numb. It took a conscious effort to bend them. "Here. You read."

She read in a clear high singsong:

"Bolin: Research informs me that no on-site study was made of the Gax-plant, due to distance and cost. Studies of plant in laboratory fields under time-acceleration were made to develop repellent, but many mysteries remain. Briefly, the plant is bisexual, with ground vines representing the female, and squat woody trunks corresponding to the male. The trunks move about, seeking the garish red nuts which signal the peak of the female's breeding cycle. Immature nuts are large green melonlike growths. After fertilization, the nuts diverge into male and female, the males turning into brown sticks and the females into little doughballs. Ultimately the males grow into ambulatory trunks, and the little doughballs move about until they find an open space, at which point they take root and start growing into vines. That's about all we know at this end. So anything more will have to come from your own observation. The chief says not to spend too much time on it though. We're paying delinquency fees on overdue contracts. Concentrate on

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moving those nuts. (signed) Rintor, Assistant Chief."

Bolin frowned as she rolled up the tape. "Funny, I never saw any of those walking trunks."

"I think they avoid the vicinity of the station, sir."

"Hmmm. How are our plantings doing?"

"I think the red one ate the white one, sir."

"What?"

"The doughball is gone. And the red fruit is fatter."

Bolin strode into the dome and looked at the pots ranked along one wall. Patches of gray rot mottled the green melon. The brown stick had grown to a height of thirty inches and sprouted a blister at the top. A cluster of rootlets gripped the soil. The red nut had turned pink, and a white pulpy growth swelled from the incision made by his thumbnail. The pot which had contained the doughball was tipped over. The doughball was gone.

"Did you open the iris this morning?"

"Yes, sir. To air out the station. I watched, so the vines did not come in. Nothing went out."

"Let's search. It probably rolled under something."

After a half hour, Bolin abandoned his search and ate breakfast. There were plenty more where that came from ....

He flew the grav-sled over the nearest range of low mountains and found a broad level plain at least forty miles across. Here and there protruded a brown stumpy growth with a single limp vine growing from its top. They moved among the vines at the rate of a slow walk.

Hovering beside one, Bolin saw that it had elastic roots tipped with horny claws. The roots in front gouged the dirt and pulled it forward, while those in back pushed it along. Two longer roots grew from its midsection and kept it from tipping over as it rocked and teetered through the vines.

Bolin watched it edge up to the prickly barrier between plants. The tangled thorns sorted themselves out and drew apart, leaving a gap for the trunk to amble through. As it approached the central stem, the tentacle which grew from the top of the trunk swelled out and lengthened, dipped down under the umbrella stalk and touched a green nut which hung there.

Nothing happened. The trunk passed through the wall of thorns to the next plant. Bolin saw the crimson nut hanging under the central stem. The tree tentacle dipped down and touched it. A sharp dagger-thorn slid out from its tip and scratched the red fruit. It oozed a caramel sap....

Suddenly the mother vine lashed out and enwrapped the stump. It froze, immobile. The vine

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began slithering, spiraling up the trunk, while the umbrella stalk folded out to expose a dewy rose-pink cavity. The trunk's fleshy tentacle curved up like a question mark and plunged down into the hole. The vines curled up and covered the stump until none of it was visible, but only the vines, writhing, swelling and shrinking in a deep, slow, organic rhythm....

The rhythm of sex.

Bolin watched with a prickly sensation, feeling like a voyeur. The rhythm quickened, erupted in a threshing frenzy. Leaves flew everywhere. The bulky mass of vines erupted outward, then collapsed and lay limp upon the earth.

The male — as Bolin called it in his mind — slowly pulled his roots under him and rose, teetering to his feet. After a minute the trunk lurched on.

During the next five hours, Bolin flew at least a hundred miles in the direction of the setting sun. Everywhere he saw the same green sea ... thousands of doughballs oozing westward beneath the leaves ... thousands of gnarled trunks sinking fleshy pseudopods into quivering complaisant vines. The ratio appeared to be one male to every twenty females. He found several which had rooted and remained standing while the sucker vines penetrated their thick bark. Apparently the females fed on the males after their breeding function ended. He found a few which had been totally devoured, leaving only the dense compacted tendrils of the vine. Reaching the limit of his range, he flew back to the station to recharge his power pack. It was dark by the time he reached the dome, and he felt used-up, sweated out from a full day in the muggy heat. Annie served him cold beer and saw him settled on his sleeping mat. She made no attempt at seduction, and he was grateful. After watching the vines all day, he felt surfeited with sex....

He dreamed himself in the throes of an erotic orgy with an exotic witch whose hair smelled of spices. She had copper skin and emerald eyes....

...But the hand shaking him belonged to Annie.

"Sir, it is light again."

He struggled to a sitting position and felt the flaccid weakness of his muscles. "I don't feel a bit rested. And I've got to start picking nuts...."

She held out a cup of coffee. "Drink this. I will prepare breakfast."

Muffins and gravy and a slab of broiled tapir recharged his energy supply. He hooked on the cargo-sled and flew out to look for concentrations of ripe nuts. Unfortunately they were scattered among

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the other plants at a ratio of about one in ten. He had to drop down for each plant, leap out with his machete while the vine was still in shock from his heat-blast, hack off the nut, grab it and run back to the sled before the vine mobilized its defenses. Sweat poured off his body and squished inside his boots. He could gather no more than five nuts before he had to soar up into the cooler air, gulp water, and smear himself with fresh repellent.

After four hours he was near collapse from heat exhaustion and had barely covered the bottom of the trailer. He flew back to the station and searched the locker for a coolant suit. Unfortunately, since planetary temperatures were well within the human range (it wasn't the heat, it was the humidity, but nobody considered that), none had been supplied.

He spent an hour making leg armor out of durilium fuel tubes. These enabled him to plow through the thorny hedges, but the red juice spurted onto his hands and raised painful blisters.

Gloves seemed to be the answer.

He flew back to the station and found insulated gauntlets used for handling hot metal. On the first trial the vines seized the gloves and pulled them off. Bolin impegnated them with repellent. The vine developed a hard, rocklike knob on the end of a long thin filament. It whirred through the air and thonked his skull a dozen times before he reached the grav-sled and lifted off. He returned to the station, put on an atmospheric helmet, and tried again. The vines released a gas from their bladders which doubled him up in a fit of vomiting....

That night he lay on his mat while Annie undressed him and sponged his exhausted body with warm water. He fell asleep and dreamed he was back at work in the vines. He cursed and tried to awaken, but the dream held him....

...He looked down at Annie, who seemed to be floating above the vines. She was picking fruits, and the trailer was heaped with red nuts sparkling in the sun...

He awoke with the idea fully formed. He rigged up a nylon sling in which Annie could sit and a basket which he could pull up and tip into the cargo trailer.

The technique worked. He skimmed at fifty feet, above the hot choking miasma of the vines, while Annie swung at the end of the line like some lovely bait. The vine ignored her until the knife touched the nut. Then it lashed out its tentacles with a writhing frenzy, but Bolin soared quickly and pulled her out of reach. Control of the grav-sled took intense concentration, since he had to halt her pendulum swing before he lowered

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her to the next plant.

Within an hour she filled three baskets, which he hauled up and dumped into the cargo trailer. The work settled into a dull routine which deadened his mind. He didn't notice the sudden drag on the line until she called:

"The vines have me, sir."

He looked down and saw that the tendrils had coiled around her legs. A tentacle looped around her throat and jerked her out of the sling. He lowered the sled to let his exhaust blow the vines away from her body. Her body was no longer there. He saw a hump snaking away beneath the leaves. When he got there the hump was gone. Instead, several humps were moving away, and Bolin thought: *My God, they've torn her apart!*

He skimmed the vicinity playing his heat-exhaust on the vines until he glimpsed her lying in a cocoon of tendrils. He sprayed the area with repellent, dropped down, and dragged her into the sled. She sat beside him and plucked away the dead vines while he soared up into the cool air. He was soggy with sweat, and he looked with envy at her cool dry skin.

"Androids don't sweat, do they?"

"No, sir. Our bodies use a chemical coolant. Also we operate best at higher than human temperatures."

He handed her a bottle of repellent. "Smear yourself with that. We'll pick some more when you've rested."

She squirted the clear liquid on her thighs and began rubbing it into her legs. "I require no rest, sir. I'll be ready in a minute."

Three hours later, when he flew back to the station to recharge the powerpack, the cargo trailer was full. He connected the leads to the station generator, told Annie to transfer the nuts to the bins, and walked to the communications console. Methodically he tapped out:

TX — BRSP — SMX —

Damn. His fingers were still too stiff to operate the keys. He called, "Annie, can you operate the communicator?"

She glided in, cool and unperturbed. "If you instruct me, sir."

He showed her the keyboard, the message plate which held the stored message, and the button which would compress the coded symbols and blurt them to the comm-center on Eros. "This is to Bern Stelke, Chief Expeditor.

"Chief. I have solved the gathering problem and expect to have (1) RQDT cargo within eighty hours. Trader Ahmed has vanished. Since planet lacks native population or food plants, suggest you list him as missing, presumed

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dead. My nonexpert opinion is he lost his mind. All I've got is a message he left on the comm-console, which I quote in case anybody wants his last words: 'I have kicked old barren logic out of my house and married the daughter of the vine...' "

"Sir, the correct quotation is: 'I divorced barren reason from my bed, and took the daughter of the vine to spouse.' "

He looked at her. "I thought you were turned off when he sent it."

"I was. But the verse was written by an acient sage of Ahmed's race. He had me recite it often. 'You know my friend, with what a brave carouse, I made a second marriage in my house. Divorced barren reason—' "

Bolin interrupted. "Okay. Change the last part and send the message. I feel like taking a nap."

The pallet seemed to reach up and enfold him. He fell instantly into a dream of clinging langorous passion....

"Sir, I have a problem...."

He opened his eyes to see Annie standing at the foot of the mat. One breast had expanded to the size of her head, stretching the nipple to a five-inch diameter. Her oval face was pebbled with blisters the size of marbles. Craters were bursting all over her body, oozing a milky sap....

"What *happened,* for God's sake?"

"The repellent, sir. I smmmm-zzzzbbbgggghhhh...."

Her jaw sagged; her tongue slid out and hung down past her chin, melting away in stringy drips which spattered her stomach. Her legs bowed out like hot wax candles, letting her sink to the floor in a viscid heap.

Bolin ran into the storage shed and found the warranty stenciled inside the repellent carton. At the end of paragraph nineteen he read: *Prolonged contact with repellent causes breakdown of android cell structure. Arrest disintegration by freezing for 20 hours. Android may then reconstruct self from matrix, provided brain is undamaged.*

Well, he supposed he wasn't the first man to use a product without reading the fine print. He picked Annie up, carried her to the cooler, and shoved her inside. He closed the door and turned down the dial to 20 degrees F and was relieved when her flesh stopped sloughing off. He only hoped it wasn't too late. Her nose and mouth hung from her chin, and her eyes had fallen back into her head....

That night he ate a chalky supper and missed Annie. He had a feeling he would also miss the 2,338 GMU which would be docked from his bonus for negligent destruction of an android, Class B.

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He went to bed and dreamed again. He awoke in a state of intense sexual excitement, but miserably aware that his sleeping cubicle had grown unbearably stuffy. He felt as though spider webs covered his face and filled his nostrils. He rose up choking, staggered to the door, and threw it open. Outside in the main room it was the same. The air-purifier had gone kaput; the entire power system was out.

Also—

One of the buckets had tipped over, and the brown stick had escaped. The trail of dirt led to the storage shed where the nuts were kept. These were scattered all over the floor, slashed, stomped and crushed to a stinking pink slime which pinched his nostrils and gave him a mad desire to take off his clothes and run out into the vines.

Of course — the male had gone seeking the female. He must have been terribly frustrated, to titillate what appeared to be thousands of female erotic organs without receiving a single stroke in return. Apparently he'd mistaken the power cable which carried juice to the grav-sled for a female tentacle. It must have taken terrific force to yank the cable from its wall juncture, but that's what had shorted out the power....

And burned the poor lad to a twist of charcoal.

He cut the main switch and spliced the cable, choking in the stench of rotten Gax-nuts and sweating in the stale air. When the blowers were working again, he walked around and surveyed the damage.

Poor Annie. All her lovely flesh lay in a sticky puddle around her feet. Even the fibrous matrix had sunk floorward. If she'd been clothed in flesh, she'd have been a three-foot dwarf....

Just when he'd begun to get some use out of her.

He turned on the refrigeration and went to inspect the two plants which remained in the buckets. The green nut had dissolved into slime, but the red nut seemed to be still growing. The ooze which marked his thumbnail puncture had swelled into a pulpy knot the size of an apple. Four other bumps swelled out from the flattened ovoid, so that it resembled a fat, bulbous starfish.

He felt a sudden curiosity to know why the doughballs rolled west and what they did when they got there. He started toward the grav-sled when a bell pinged on the comm-console. He ran up and saw the words dancing on the glowing screen:

CARR BOLIN
EMERGENCY EXPEDITOR E-7
BLURT-TRANSMISSION

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RELAYED VIA M-6 FOMALHAUT

Bolin felt a premonition as he fed the coil of high-speed tape into the retarder. Verbal transmission through subspace relay cost a thousand Gummies per millisecond, and though you could squeeze about five minutes of talk into that space of time, the cost — equivalent to a year's pay for a trader — was so high that only a VIP with a very important bitch would use it. He immediately recognized the growl of Chief Expeditor Stelke, who always talked as if he had the leg of an employee between his teeth:

"Bolin! I want a report on Ahmed and I want it now. If we don't get a definite cause of death on traders, we're supposed to quarantine the planet for a year until we find out if there's disease, hostile action, or poisons in the atmosphere. The good old days are gone, boy! Free enterprise is being strangled by legal nosepickers and bleeding hearts. So give me something definite, malignant hangnail or whatever. Got that!"

"Yes, sir, but —"

"Bolin? Bolin, are you there?"

"Yes, sir. You're forgetting the five-second transmission lag—"

"Bolin! Goddamnit, are you—? Oh, there you are. All right, the second thing is — will you stop ... all right. Yes, the time lag, I know. Now shut up and let me finish. I've ordered the transport dispatched twenty hours ahead of schedule with three more to follow at forty-hour intervals. The price of Gax-essence has shot out of sight, and Gax is the only source. So good picking. If you come through, I'll double your bonus. Got that? Over."

"Double your fat ass," muttered Bolin. Aloud he said, "Listen, I've got to know something. What are the Gax-nuts used for?"

He waited five ticks of the clock, then heard Stelke's voice:

"We sell it to Interstellar Cosmetics. What they do with it I don't — oh, wait a second. My secretary says they press out the oil and use it as a base for aphrodisiac perfume."

"You mean it attracts human males?"

"Wait? Oh, she says definitely yes. Women will pay almost any price for essence of Gax. Look, Bolin, I can't afford to sit here chatting about women's fashions. I'm signing off. Keep those lovely brown nuts coming."

"Red nuts!" yelled Bolin. "The damn things are red!"

But the transmission had ended.

Morosely, Bolin watched the tape flap around the reel. He gazed out the port and visualized four

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transports landing one by one, sitting silently shrouded in vapors from their fuel tanks, then blasting off one by one — empty. At a cost of 8,000 Gummies per ship.

Even his great-grandchildren would be in debt to ITC — if he survived to have any.

He sneered at the sea of green vines. "Bitch," he said. "You won't get me...."

Suddenly he felt sleepy. He started toward his pad, then realized he'd gotten up less than two hours before. No point in lying down anyway. The dreams would give him no rest....

Might as well look for Ahmed.

He began circling the dome in ever-widening diameters. Ten miles out he glanced back toward the dome and found his vision obstructed by a basalt outcropping which resembled a bell. He'd passed the outcropping several times, but had never seen it from this angle. Now he remembered the dream, and the face staring from the niche....

He flew closer and saw a dark crevice where two boulders had tipped together. He grounded the sled and walked toward it....

A man stood in the shadowed niche, wearing pale green trader's coveralls. He had an olive complexion, glossy black hair, and a placid smile. His brown eyes stared at Bolin.

"Trader Ahmed?" asked Bolin when he found his voice.

No answer. Bolin stepped closer. "Sorry. I can't speak Arabic—"

He broke off when he realized the eyes were not following his movements. Bolin stepped up to the figure and moved his palm in front of the eyes. No reaction. Bolin tapped the staring eyeball with his fingernail.

Tic-tic. Tic-tic.

Bolin shivered inside. Trader Ahmed was no longer alive. Not even his flesh remained. The compacted fibers of the vine had replaced him in every detail, down to eye lashes and a brown mole on the right cheekbone.

"She sure took the best of you, Ahmed."

Bolin giggled, then realized he was giddy with fatigue. He gripped the figure around the elbows and tugged. The figure was light, but it wouldn't yield. He heaved and saw the thick root extending into the rock from Ahmed's feet. He burned it through, then laid the body down on its back. It had the deep rich beauty of polished agate, and Bolin was sure his family would want it as a keepsake — but the regulations were inflexible. Bodies must be destroyed *in situ*, otherwise they might become breeding cultures for unknown diseases.

He set his blaster on burn and

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intoned the standard ITC memorial service: "From undifferentiated matter ariseth, to the same returneth...."

As he scraped the ashes into a standard body bag, a filament whipped out and stung him behind the ear. Realizing that sweat had diluted his repellent, he raced back to the grav-sled.

So much for Ahmed, he thought as he soared aloft. That left only the minor problem of gathering four shiploads of nuts.

He felt too tired to even think about it. He found himself flying westward, and realized he'd made an unconscious decision to solve the riddle of the doughballs.

The land rose in a series of broad steppes culminating in a low mountain range about three hundred miles out from the station. From this point it sloped down to a jagged red line which twisted like a bloody welt across the green continent. As he got nearer, he saw that the redness was the sun reflecting on a broad river. The near side was a thicket of thorns. The far side was barren sand.

Doughballs were thick on the east bank. They followed hidden channels under the thorns and plopped into the water by the thousands. Like rubber balls, they eddied and swirled in the current, drifting toward the opposite shore.

But none seemed to reach it. Huge hippolike mammals swam upstream, lower jaws hinged open like loading ramps, sucking in doughballs and flushing water out through gills in their sides. Flocks of lizardlike birds with leathery wings and swordlike beaks soared above the current, spearing doughballs and gulping them down.

Poor little chicks. They work so hard to become fish food.

He flew along the barren shore until he saw a doughball drift into the bank, extrude its forward portion, and begin oozing up the sandy slope. He heard a snort, saw a pair of jaws open up. The doughball disappeared into the gullet of a broad flat carnivore which rippled across the sand like a stingray.

A mile west of the river, the desert began to sprout throny scrub and low bushes. Bolin landed the grav-sled on a grass-tufted hillock and sat down on a rock, letting the fresh cool breeze blow on his face. He could taste the sweetness of the air and realized how miserable he'd felt amid the vines, with a constant pressure in his groin and that endless jangling frustration of not knowing what to do.

He broke open a packet of nutrient mash, mixed it with water, and spooned it down. Even that tasted delicious in the clean cool air.

He felt movement beneath him.

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He jumped up. The rock was shrinking! He watched it draw up into a doughball and start rolling away. He caught it in his hands, but it oozed through his fingers and dripped to the ground. It lay for a second, then spread out into a pancake and rippled away. It began moving faster, and he saw that it had sprouted a dozen short legs on its bottom. They grew longer and longer, until it was hopping like a rabit. A beaked lizard-bird dived out of the sun, missed the hopping creature, and circled back for another pass. Two swellings appeared on each side of the doughball; these spread into thin membranes, and with a final superhop it soared into the air and flapped across the valley.

It was getting dark when Bolin returned to the station. He spent an hour clearing the vines off the dome and burning the clumped mass away from the cargo lock. He floated inside and keyed the lock shut behind him.

Annie stood holding a frosted drink in her hand.

Bolin let the sled drop with a bone-jolting thump. "Great galaxy! I never expected to see *you* again!"

She smiled and held out the drink. He siped it and looked at her. Copper skin glowed in the dim light. Small hand-sized breasts sprouted from the barrel of her torso; her stomach formed a rounded mount, with a naval deep enough to contain his index finger up to the first knuckle.

"I don't get it. I told you my ideal was tall, slim girls."

"Is it?"

Her voice had become a deep authoritative contralto.

"That's what I always chose on leave...."

"You chose that type so that you could humiliate them. Because you feared them. Fat girls are a much better lay, you'll see."

The sheer feminine challenge in her eyes made him feel weak and helpless. He would be no match for her on the mat; she would make him crawl; and how would that look back at leave-center, Carr Bolin in love with a cockannie....

After all these years?

That in itself made him highly suspicious.

He walked into the main dome to inspect his plantings. The green melon was only a dry stain on the dirt, but the red nut was still growing. The four bumps had grown into fleshy flippers, and the pulpy knot had grown away from the main mass.

At least it hadn't turned into a CA.

"Annie, come here."

She walked to him, smiling, languid, poised — a woman sure of her talents.

"Turn around."

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She turned. He reached out and caught the transparent flap, peeled it down. The instructions were still there, stenciled on her pseudo-flesh. He patted it back in place, feeling relieved. The sight of those doughballs turning into things had made him paranoid.

"I found Ahmed's body," he said.

"Interesting."

"I thought you cared."

"That was days ago. You are now my love, my light, my life...."

Her yellow-green eyes were mocking, tempting.

"I don't understand how you changed yourself. I didn't think androids could initiate."

"You keyed the change, sir. My obedience bored you; so did the limitations which Ahmed had placed upon my intelligence. But the changes could not be made until I was broken down to matrix. Once this was done, by the repellent, the changes were put into effect."

"Well, you're quicker — more exciting too, that I'll admit."

"I just have work to do—"

"What work?"

"I've got a report to get off to the chief. And the damn transport will be landing in ..." He glanced at his chromometer. "... less than 40 hours. I've still got to solve the picking problem..."

"No problem. Put me in an atmosphere suit, coat it with repellent, and swing me above the vines as you did before. I can fill your ship in a day...."

He frowned. "It sounds too easy..."

"All problems look simple, once they're solved." She smiled. "Go send your report, darling. I'll fix your supper..."

He watched her saunter out, shook his head, and took a seat at the comm-console. Good thing he could see the end of the tour in sight; otherwise it seemed probable that he would break his lifelong rule....

He sighed and began typing out his official report:

The Eco-system of Gax. Origin of vines is uncertain. They are a monopolistic life form with a self-enclosed eco-system. No other plants or animals can coexist with the vines. The rolling doughballs, which may either be called females or seed fruits, infiltrate beyond the periphery of the gax-vine area by assuming the form of their predators. This function is mimetic; i.e., instinctive rather than a result of mentation ....

Bolin sensed movement outside the range of his vision. He got up and went to look at the object in the pot. The four appendages had grown into jointed limbs, with fleshy buttons sprouting from their ends. The pulpy mass on top had

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hardened into a dome-shape and was connected to the main mass by a short fleshy column. Bolin decided it could have been a neck, viewed from a certain angle, and the button growing in front could be a nose, and those two sunken depressions on either side could be eyes....

The cursed doughball was trying to copy the human form! Bolin shuddered and walked back to the console, feeling an urgent desire to wind up his assignment and get away.

... These plants cannot grow in isolation. The migrating doughballs must reach a colony of sufficient numbers to permit cross-fertilization. Tentatively, I set the minimum survival number at five hundred plants, since this was the smallest grouping I saw.

Logically there is nothing to prevent the Gax-vine from totally enshrouding the planet, except that it quickly exhausts nutrients in the soil.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The present trading dome is situated in the center of a continental concentration of Gax-vines. For reasons which require further study, the dome has become surrounded by a super-vine approximately 1,000 times normal size. This could be a defensive reaction or a mutation brought on by heavy doses of repellent. With four (4) lift-engines (which I hereby requisition by first RQDT) it will be possible to move the dome to an uncolonized area beyond the river marked on survey maps as V-4. The increased distance from nut sources will be more than offset by savings in repellent. At its present rate of use, this costs one-sixth the value of the cargo. 2. Traders should avoid handling the Gax-nuts, since their aphrodisiac nature causes erotic fantasies which interrupt sleep and distract the trader from his duties. Ultimately this may cause psychosis of the type which led to the death of trader Ahmed, who ingested one of nuts and attempted to have sexual relations with the vine. Curiously, this awakened desire can only be satisfied by the vines. Toward the station android one feels only a mild fraternal interest ...

Bolin lifted his head at the sound of singing from the kitchen. He went to the archway and saw Annie setting steaming dishes on the table. She wore a lace-trimmed apron, nothing else. The air was filled with an exciting, sensuous perfume. As she bent to take a bowl from the synthesizer, he found himself tilting his head with the bend of her waist.

He returned to the console and forced his thought pattern back into officialese:

... a mild fraternal interest

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which apparently breaks down as time erodes one's innate prejudices. However I request that one (1) air-conditioned suit permeated with repellent be included in the next RQDT. This, plus the added precaution of storing the nuts in air-tight compartments, will prevent any contact with Gas-essence. If this is done, and the dome moved, I foresee no difficulty in harvesting Gax-nuts.

Also send one (1) life-support capsule for evacuation of yours truly. I feel overqualified in a trader's function. I am also in need of a long rest, in the company of human females.

Respectfully, C. Bolin, E-7

He punched the send button and stood up, stretching his arms. He felt relaxed enough to enjoy a good meal. The RQDT would arrive in thirty hours, and with Annie helping he could quickly fill it. His job would be over — well within the time limit for his bonus.

She watched him devour his meal, then served him an after-dinner liquor which exuded a spicy, sensuous fragrance.

"An excellent drink, Annie."

"I think I prefer to be called Beatrice."

"Oh?" Bolin felt slightly intoxicated. "Now you have preferences ... Beatrice?"

"I have a mind. Why shouldn't I have preferences?"

"But your thoughts proceed only in linear sequence—"

"In a very curvy and sinuous manner, my expeditor. If only you could expedite an erection — however small...."

Bolin felt his neck grow hot. "You seem to have mastered male psychology also. But I'll tell you again ... it ... will ... not ... work. I've got a mental block against making it with androids. If you must know, I was raised by a nurse-annie, and the very idea strikes me as obscene and incestuous—"

He gasped as her toes nudged his groin under the table. Such amazing, soft, prehensile toes she had....

He shoved back his chair and stood up.

"Bedtime, Beatrice."

"I thought you'd never ask."

He turned and placed his palm flat against her chest. "I've got a long day's work tomorrow. I'd like to get just one night's sleep before I leave this planet."

"You're *leaving*?"

"Just as soon as the transport arrives with my life-support capsule. I'll turn you off before I go, and you'll know nothing until you're awakened by the next trader."

He saw the shimmer in her eyes and turned away. Coping with Annie's tears had been bad

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enough, but he was sure Beatrice could turn on a much more harrowing performance.

Setting his jaw, he walked to his sleeping pad, undressed, and lay down.

She appeared in the doorway. "Take me with you."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why do you say it's ridiculous? Isn't it done?"

"Sure it's done. I've known traders who actually fell in love with station androids. They grieve when they transfer out. Some even save their money to buy a particular CA and carry her with them from station to station. I've never gone in for that. Not that I look down on them, but there's a dangerous self-deception involved. It leads to fantasizing, daydreaming, and inefficiency on the job. You understand?"

"I understand your rationalization, yes."

"Good. Now go away and let me sleep."

She leaned against the archway and folded her arms. "You refuse me because you're afraid to love me. You loved your nurse-annie and they turned her off. The cold dead eyes stared out and she wouldn't answer...."

"You shouldn't listen when I talk in my sleep."

She knelt at the foot of his pad. "I'm sorry. I don't wish to make you mad. I love you."

"Because you're programmed that way. Damnit, I'm not. I'm human. I have free will. And my free will says I've got to get some sleep. Good night!"

He pulled the sleeping pad around his head and closed his eyes. He fell asleep before Beatrice left the chamber.

There were no dreams. His slumber was sodden as death. Only thirst reached him, thirst and a sense of vague unease.

He got up and stumbled to the water tap. He turned the faucet and waited, not yet willing to wake up. But no water came out. Muttering curses under his breath, he opened the check door to the water closet. He jumped back as a spaghetti-mass of vines spilled out. They were slithering out of the conduit which led down from the main tank.

He ran out into the kitchen. Something entangled his feet and tripped him flat. The floor was cobwebbed with hair-thin filaments.

"Annie!" He called, then remembered: "Beatrice!"

No answer. He got up and ran into the main dome. The floor was matted with soft, slithering vines. Looking up, he saw that the dome was completely closed in. The door iris had been opened, and a huge trunk, as thick as a man's waist, was oozing through the opening.

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Bolin set his blaster on burn and sliced the trunk in two. Then he played heat on the severed end until it drew back through the hole. This exhausted the charge in his blaster, but at least it cleared the door. He pressed the button to close the iris. Nothing happened.

The power was off.

He opened the door to the transformer box. Another clotted mass of tendrils tumbled out and fell to the floor. Great Galaxy! The vines had taken over the dome while he slept.

"Beatrice!"

Still no answer. He ran to the comm-console, which had its own power supply. He pressed the emergency-evac button and waited for the red light to blink. Nothing happened. He kicked the plastic cabinet and got a dull, sodden thunk. Opening the inspection panel, he saw what he dreaded: a tight compacted mass of tendrils.

He stood staring, his mind turning sluggishly, reluctant to accept the full import of the tragedy. Stranded. Of course the RQDT would come, and the life-capsule with it. But there was no power to reach the landing pad. His blaster was exhausted, he couldn't recharge it. The repellent might keep him alive until the RQDT arrived, but how could he reach it without getting turned into a lovely wooden statue?

Maybe Beatrice could come up with an idea....

Sudden hope put power in his lungs.

"Beatrice! Where the hell are you?"

He started opening cupboards and storage bins. A crumpled sheet of black plastic covered the bottom of the refrigerator. He lifted it up and saw a pile of congealed slush and a vaguely raised pattern which was all that remained of an android matrix.

Hic jacet Annie. Then who was Beatrice?

His brain felt numb as he stumbled back out into the main dome. The vines lay quiescent beneath his feet, just as they had in the fields, after their orgasmic union with the trunks.

"Beatrice!" he called. "Come out if you hear! I know what you are! Come out, Beatrice...."

A gigantic doughball appeared in the door of the cargo shed. It oozed toward him, stopped about four feet away. A swelling appeared on top, then rose into a column. The column divided at its base and sprouted two appendages on its sides. The pasty color darkened to a coppery brown. The head formed, the blue-red hair, the yellow-green eyes, the ivory teeth...

"You called, sir?"

"My God! How long has it been this way?"

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"Since the other was destroyed. We thought you might grow bored, and leave us."

"We? Who's we?

"All this...." She made a wide sweep with her hand, which included the vines covering the dome. "My mother."

Bolin could find no words. Numb and speechless, he stumbled to the doorway of the storage shed. There seemed to be no end to surprises. The bins were full of ripe gax-fruits. The trailer too. It would easily fill the RQDT.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"Mother did it. That is why I opened the door, so that she could come in. The cargo-lock I don't understand...."

"But *why*?"

"So the evil man, Stelke, would not take you away. He will be happy now. He likes our eggs, so she will make many for him. Enough to fill three ships, ten ships, as many as he wants. Will he not be happy?"

"He'll dribble all over himself with joy. But what about *me?* That damn vine ... your mother — has been trying to kill me ever since I landed."

"Oh, no! Not kill. We do not kill. Even the wild creatures who eat my sisters, we do not kill."

"What about Ahmed?"

"We did not want him to eat our eggs. They are meant to be scratched only, and rubbed. We were sorry he poisoned himself. He was dying in agony, and we made him happy. Didn't you see his smile?"

Bolin shuddered. "I don't think I want to smile like that."

"You don't understand. We only wish to make love. When you touch our eggs, we grow excited. But you don't act like our males, who remain standing while we make love. You run, and this drives us insane. That is why we love you so much. Our males are slow. And they use up so fast. Twelve ... twenty eggs ... finished. But you go on and on. We try to seize, hold, so we can take your seed for our babies. Otherwise the eggs drop off and do not grow. Now we will have many."

Bolin stared at her. "You expect me to set up housekeeping with a *plant?* Hell! I'd rather screw an android."

She smiled. "You have not been cold these last three nights."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

Her smile sagged at the corners. Her arms lengthened, touched the floor. Her legs melted, her torso flowed out until she was nothing but a thick puddle on the floor. Then the sides began to draw up, the ends to square off. A pillow appeared at one end, and he saw....

His sleeping pad.

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Then, like a film running backward, the process quickly reversed itself, and Beatrice stood before him.

"I can't believe it. You mean for the last three nights—"

"We make love. All night. So nice, no?"

"And that...." He pointed at the object which had been in the pail. It had fallen out onto the floor and was trying to put one of its fingerlike digits into its mouth cavity. "What *is* it?"

"Our child," she said. "Aren't you happy? He will look just like you."

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Charles Fritch is a California-based editor and occasional contributor who says that the title of this story was inspired by a combination of Harlan Ellison and Judy Garland thoughts. As for the story itself, enjoy, but watch out for trolleybirds.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Went The Trolleybird

by CHARLES E. FRITCH

When was the last time you heard a trolleybird clang? Not recently, I'll bet. Long an endangered species, the trolleybirds have finally died out.

Why?

Because there are no more trolleys, and if there are no more trolleys, there is no need for trolleybirds.

So what? you might ask.

If you were a trolleybird, you'd care.

Or if you were a man like Joshua Barnum, you'd care.

Joshua Barnum was a trolleybird lover. He discovered what was probably the last trolleybird in a nest above an old trolley barn in Vermont, where the bird's parents had succumbed while waiting for the one remaining rust-infected, dust-covered trolley car to roar into action.

Barnum took the trolleybird home and gave it a life of comfort. He fed it trolleybird seeds and let it fly around the house as much as it wanted.

What it really wanted, however, was a trolley to fly to.

Which is why Joshua Barnum returned to Vermont, bought the old rusty, dusty trolley, and had it towed to his front yard.

Well, sir, you never saw a happier trolleybird. It climbed right up into the bell of the trolley and went *Clang! Clang! Clang!* Then it flew over to Joshua Barnum's shoulder and nuzzled his ear gratefully to show its deep appreciation.

"Enjoy, trolleybird, enjoy!" was Joshua's comment.

And the trolleybird enjoyed. It enjoyed from the tip of its razor-sharp beak to the tip of its downy-smooth tail. It enjoyed in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, in the night, and in the midmorning.

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Clang! went the trolleybird. *Clang! Clang! Clang!*

Joshua reveled in the trolleybird's antics, but his eyes were getting red and his cheeks were getting puffy and his legs were dragging like tree-stumps — all because he wasn't getting enough sleep, thanks to the trolleybird's clanging.

One grim morning he called the trolleybird over to perch on his shoulder and, a bit more crossly than he had originally intended, said, "Listen to me, trolleybird, you've got to change your ways. I don't mind you going *clang! clang! clang!* in the morning or in the afternoon, or in the evening, or even in the night. But I've got to get some sleep."

But the ways of a trolleybird are hard to change. Nature has bred in them an obstinacy difficult to overcome. The trolleybird nuzzled Joshua Barnum affectionately, flew a halo over his head, and then catapulted itself with renewed determination at the trolley bell.

Clang! Clang! went the trolleybird. *Clang! Clang! Clang!*

"Now — see — here, trolleybird," Joshua said sternly, "enough is enough." He waved a warning finger under the trolleybird's beak. "If you don't stop clang-clanging at all hours of the early morning, I'll have to take your trolley away from you."

Now, if there's one thing a trolleybird doesn't like, it's to have a warning finger wagged under its beak. If there's another thing it doesn't like, it's threats to have its trolley — and perhaps the last trolley in the world — taken from it.

The trolleybird bit off Joshua Barnum's finger.

"Owl Ouch! Ow! Ow! Ow!" Joshua said, hopping madly about the room sucking his bloody stump. "Damnit, trolleybird, this time you've gone too far. Keeping me awake all night long with your clang! clang! clang! is one thing, but biting off a finger of the hand that feeds you is quite another."

The trolleybird seemed truly penitent. It hung its feathered head and looked up at Joshua with the saddest brown trolleybird eyes that already were misting sorrowfully.

"Sure, look sad, see what good that does me!" Joshua ranted.

Joshua locked the trolleybird in the house and went to have his wound attended to by a local doctor, who assured him that the effects of a trolleybird's bite are quite permanent, that his finger was gone forever, and there was no way he was going to grow a new one.

Joshua had gotten used to that finger, and his annoyance had not diminished by the time he returned to his house. "I've got," he

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decided, "to teach that crazy trolleybird a lesson." He stood beside the trolley in his front yard and watched the trolleybird looking worriedly at him through the big picture window.

"Did I go too far?" Joshua asked himself, suddenly concerned.

He rushed into the house to find trolley. The trolleybird's eyes widened in alarm. He took out the wicker seats. The trolleybird hopped up and down excitedly. When he disengaged the bell from its moorings, the trolleybird went into a fine feathered frenzy, and Joshua feared for a moment the bewildered bird would suffer a stroke. Nevertheless, he persevered, for the trolleybird must be taught a lesson it would not soon forget.

He labored well into the afternoon, and when he was finished, the trolley lay in a thousand pieces on the ground in front of his house in full sight of the trolleybird.

Except the trolleybird was no longer looking through the big picture window.

"Did I go too far?" Joshua asked himself, suddenly concerned.

He rushed into the house to find that he had indeed gone too far. The trolleybird lay on its back on the floor, scrawny trolleybird legs pointing toward the ceiling, on its face the saddest look a dead trolleybird could possibly possess.

In its death throes, however, it had laid an egg.

It's a well-known fact that trolley-birds do not require a mate in order to lay a fertilized egg. This miracle can be accomplished under severe stress, such as watching a trolley being dismembered and then dying of frustration and anger because of it.

Joshua picked up the egg. Like most eggs, it was egg-shaped, and it didn't appear to be much different from other eggs he'd seen, except this one was much larger, about the size of a person's head.

"Well," Joshua consoled himself, tapping his bandaged stump against the egg, "at least I shall have another trolleybird in the house."

As it turned out, he was quite mistaken about that. In the throes of dying and eager for revenge, the trolleybird had laid an egg one step further up on the evolutionary scale (or down, depending upon your point of view). Inside the egg was a headbird, so called because a headbird likes, among other things, to perch on a person's head.

In response to Joshua's tapping, the egg cracked as a sharp beak penetrated the shell. Startled, Joshua leaped back, dropping the egg onto the living room floor, where it split into two equal parts and fell open. The egg's former occupant, a mean-eyed headbird,

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fluttered out, took one look at Joshua and, beating its fuzzy wings quickly, rocketed to a position atop Joshua Barnum's head.

Few people can dodge a determined headbird, and Joshua was one of those who could not. When he cautiously raised his eyes, he saw the bird's long sharp needlebeak flicking rapierlike this way and that, and with the memory of a late, lamented finger strong in his mind, he was not about to place a hand on the headbird to dislodge it. However, no amount of shaking or twisting seemed to do the trick. The headbird merely increased the intensity of its clawgrip on Joshua's scalp.

With the beast resting firmly and apparently for all time atop his skull, Joshua sat in his most comfortable chair to think the matter out. He was truly sorry and was perfectly willing to atone for being responsible for the trolleybird's unexpected demise, but going through life with a headbird attached to his skull was not the way he was willing to do it.

What would his friends say? Four of them were coming over this very night for an evening of poker and conversation. Surely they would notice something odd about their host, namely that a large fluffy, mean-looking bird with sharp claws and a sharper beak was perched on the top of his head.

No, that would never do. He must get rid of the headbird at any cost. Having a restless headbird making a nest in your hair was not conducive to calm thought, but Joshua was desperate. In desperation, his eyes picked out a pallid bust of Pallas resting on a small table in one corner of the room. It was made of plaster and wouldn't fool anybody for long, but then how smart could a headbird be?

Joshua rose unsteadily, trying to prevent tipping over from the weight of the headbird making him top-heavy, and lurched over to the bust.

"Look, headbird," Joshua oozed his friendliest tones, "*there*'s a head you can rest on in the morning and in the afternoon and in the evening, and all night long if you want to — and no one will complain."

The headbird apparently noticed the virgin head and was intrigued by it, for Joshua felt it flirting and fluttering and finally hopping off his own fuzzy head to land on the smooth dome of the plaster bust.

This was his moment, one that might not come again for a long time. Joshua retreated quickly but quietly to the closet, where he kept a loaded shotgun ready to discourage burglars and headbirds. When he returned, the headbird had discovered the head he'd been

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lured to was not to its liking. It had a mean look in its birdeyes as it sharpened its beak on the plaster.

"Good-by, headbird," Joshua said, raising the gun, aiming it, and firing.

The bust of Pallas exploded in a shower of plaster, but the headbird had taken wing an instant earlier. Before Joshua could fire again, the headbird was upon him. It circled him at a dizzying speed and then went *thwack!* embedding its beak in Joshua's ear, continuing through his brain, and out the other ear.

Joshua sat in his most comfortable chair, not quite dead, but not quite alive either.

He was still sitting there, eyes wide, partly in this world, partly in another, when his four poker-minded friends came in and saw him. At first they didn't notice the headbird hovering gleefully in the far corner of the room, and when they did see it, all they saw was a flurry of feathers and the glint of light bouncing off its incredibly sharp, pointed beak.

Thwack! went the headbird. *Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!*

The headbird ignored the open door's invitation to freedom. Instead, it stayed overnight, hopping from one head to another, as happy as a headbird can be. By morning, however, bored and restless, it left the house of its birth and headed down the road in search of new adventure.

The headbird had a definite advantage over its parent, the trolleybird. Trolleys were extinct. People were not.

Not yet, anyway.

COMING SOON

Next month: "The Big Fans," a striking new novelet by **Keith Roberts**, author of PAVANE; short stories by **Robert Bloch, L. Sprague de Camp** and others.

Soon: "Wolfhead," a new novel by **Charles L. Harness**; "The Watched," a novella by **Christopher Priest**; "Prismatica," a new novelet by **Samuel R. Delany**, and lots more, including a Special **Harlan Ellison** issue, planned for a summer issue. Use the coupon on page 154.

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BEAUTY & BEAST REDUX

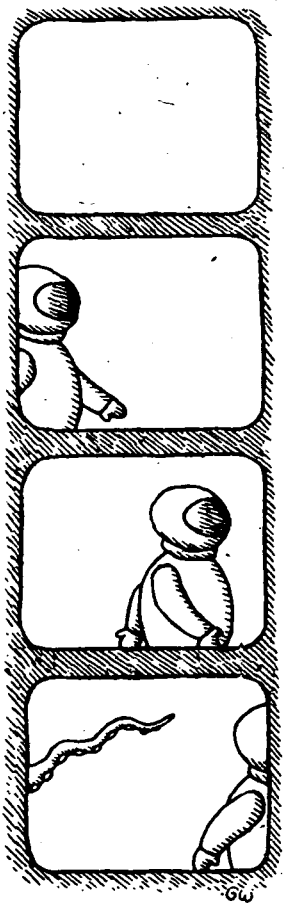
I did not know last month when an insipid filmed fairy tale (*The Slipper and the Rose* — or was it *The Rose and the Slipper* — and who, a month after, cares?) led me to go on at some length about Cocteau's legendary and mythic *La Belle et Le Bete,* that this month I would have a very contemporary version of that very legend to contend with. I make this statement immediately so that you more suspiciously minded readers will not take last month's column as a mere set up for this one.

I had heard that the unlikely pair of husband - and - wife team George C. Scott and Trish Van Deverse were to do a Beauty and Beast (respectively vice versa), but not until it turned up on prime time on the Hallmark Hall of Fame did I really believe it. And now, having seen it, I am on the horns of a critical dilemma.

As readers of last month's column will know, I am thoroughly and irrevocably in love with the Cocteau film. It is one of the few true film fantasies done without Disneyesque cuteness — it is that rare thing, a film fantasy with teeth. And, even more necessary than teeth, it has magic — real magic, both conceptual and visial.

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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I have tried, over the years, to be sure that you readers knew that I was a human voice, a single human voice. Unlike many critics, I did not want to come on an Opinion From Above. On the factual side, I can make mistakes. On the esthetic side, I know that my opinions are educated, but human, i.e. I cannot be esthetically omnipotent. And here is a perfect example. When confronted with a remake of a film that might be, if my arm were twisted, confessed to be my favorite film ever, that very fact must be taken into account by those who have not seen the Cocteau or those that have and have not liked it (misguided though I think you may be).

The Hallmark version is, indeed, very close to the classic. The general shape of the plot is the same. Merchant father returns from an unprofitable business trip in that vague 17th-century period in which so many fairy tales are laid thanks to Charles Perrault. Losing his way in the forest, he blunders into a deserted castle where he is served by an unseen host.

On leaving, he picks a single rose to take to his daughter, Beauty. He is confronted by his host, a being half human, half beast, and threatened with death unless Beauty comes to the castle.

Well, you know the whole thing ...and if you don't, you should. Both films do indeed follow the Perrault tale closely, but dramatically and filmically, they are very close to each other. But there are a good many telling differences, also.

The major one is that the TV film lacks magic. It has special effects, but it lacks magic, and until the filmmakers can tell one from the other, we will never have a surplus of great film fantasies (which, in a way, is just as well, I guess). And it is indicative that at less than a week's distance, I can't remember any of the effects except one; a hedge grows between Beauty and her father as he delivers her to the castle (no magic white horses here, to extend my point; Beauty is delivered by Daddy like a parcel of unmarked bills).

The castle — there's a prime example. The TV-film's castle is a perfectly respectable castle that anybody would like to live in, given a large staff. Handsome, very handsome. Chandeliers, polished floors, all that.

But the Cocteau film's castle was a strange, uncomfortable stone pile. Out of the walls came arms bearing candelabra, and the statues incorporated into the Baroque mantel watch constantly, their living eyes showing white in their soot blackened faces.

And Beauty's boudoir in the older version is part bedroom, part woodland glade. The later version is a very large period room which

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makes one immediately wonder how difficult it might be to heat, which is the kind of thought one shouldn't have while watching a fantasy.

Another problem is with the two principals. Scott is an admirable actor, and it is not his fault that the make-up artist decided to model the beast on a wild boar, tusks, snout and all (which makes Beauty's line about his "devouring his prey" a little zoologically suspect).

Cocteau's Beast, Jean Marais, was patterned on a lion, and somehow conveyed an enormous sexuality, eyes wild and shirt open to reveal his shaggy pelt. Scott could have taken lessons both in beastliness and princeliness from Marais; he (Scott) played the role as if he were doing Patton again, his delivery of lines deliberately American casual or, in rage, screamed like a military martinet.

And Van Devere, like most American actresses, simple can not play a princess. (OK, Beauty is a merchant's daughter, but has turned into a princess by the end as surely as the Beast has become a prince). Her pretty schoolma'arm approach emphasizes the didacticism the writers have injected into the legend, which makes it all seem to boil down to Beauty saying "I'm not about to spend the night with you until you learn to control that really unpleasant temper of yours," a simple minded reduction of the values of the old tale.

And yet... and yet... despite all this niggling, and the unfair but inevitable comparison with a work of genius, I am in admiration of the TV *Beauty and the Beast* for one extraordinary thing. We had here an intelligent and coherent fantasy made for a mass medium which was done with almost no cuteness or whimsey, and there was not one idiotic little song to be heard. Maybe the entertainment powers-that-be are realizing that the American public is ready for serious, non-juvenile fantasy.

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"Yes, I'd say you have the basis for a really sweet malpractrice suit!"

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A new story in Michael Coney's very readable and distinctive series ("The Cinderella Machine," August 1976) about The Peninsula, this one concerning an exotic and dangerous sport known as sling-gliding.

Catapult To The Stars

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

If you should visit the Peninsula on a summer afternoon, you will usually find sling-gliding in progress in the Strait off Roberts Bay.

One Saturday afternoon in mid-July a small group of us clustered around the Catapult giving encouragement and advice to Maurice St. Clair, who was about to take his maiden flight. The weather was fine and the sun bright, and the sweat trickled down St. Clair's face as we strapped the ten-foot dart-shaped training glider to his back and turned up the burners on the Catapult.

There was a good head of pressure in the stationary boiler. The Catapult had been in use all morning by the members of the Landlubbers' Club, an offshoot of the Peninsula Sling-gliding Club consisting of a handful of enthusiasts who could not afford the expense of sling-gliding proper.

St. Clair's hands were trembling so badly that he was not going to be able to fasten his release catch.

I've often thought about that afternoon since, and wondered if I'd been able to read any significance into the fear on St. Clair's face. It may be hindsight, but it seems to me that I knew St. Clair was going to die — and St. Clair knew it too....

The Catapult consists of a trolley on rails, aimed seawards. On the trolley is the Horse, to which the pilot attaches himself. Behind the trolley is the Piston, which accelerates the trolley and its passenger to a speed of around one hundred and sixty miles per hour. After the fifty-yard run the glider, pilot and Horse rise into the air. The pilot releases the Horse which falls back into the water, still attached to the cable by which it is retrieved. The pilot then streaks off across the Strait, makes a wide turn among

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the offshire islands, and returns to stall and drop neatly into the sea beside the clubhouse — into which he goes to get out of his wetsuit and calm his nerves with a drink. In this manner are sling-gliders trained.

"Assume the mating posture," called Doug Marshall jovially, drink in hand, as St. Clair lowered himself over the Horse, wings spread in the manner which always reminds me of Dracula. Marshall checked the pressure gauge on the boiler and turned on the ejector valve, spraying the residue of condensed hot water from the cylinder. I saw St. Clair wince at the sudden hiss as he fumbled with the bright-work on his harness.

I will describe the release mechanism in some detail, as it has considerable bearing on the events which followed.

The Horse is so named because of its resemblance to a piece of gymnasium equipment. It is essentially a strong padded box secured to the trolley with its upper surface inclined eight degrees from the horizontal in order to provide the pilot with the correct take-off attitude. Halfway along its upper length is the stainless-steel bracket to which the pilot attaches his harness. The pilot lies over this recessed bracket, lines up the hole in his harness with the two holes in the bracket, and secures himself with a pin. The pin, which has a diameter of three quarters of an inch, is attached to a ring around his finger to facilitate withdrawal at the correct instant.

The system has come in for much criticism.

"Are you all ready, Maurice?" called Doug Marshall.

St. Clair uttered a sound not unlike a croak, and the club secretary handed him the ceremonial goblet of fifty-year-old cognac. St. Clair twisted his head and drank awkwardly from the prone position, left-handed. With his right hand he clutched the release pin. I saw a dribble of brandy merge with the sweat on his cheek. He handed the goblet back and shut his eyes.

"Away you go!" shouted Doug, jerking at the lever.

With an explosive hiss the bright Piston sprang from the cylinder and the trolley wheels roared over the rails. Beside me, the winch screamed as the cable ran out.

I remembered the time Tom Wolstenholm's wings had disintegrated before he reached the end of the track.

The sun was very bright and St. Clair's tortured face a blur as he swept past me, accelerating, accelerating, the Piston a thrustful glitter. There was a giant *clang!* as the mechanism halted at its extremity. The roar of wheels ceased abruptly as the glider and Horse

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were thrown into the sky.

But the winch screamed on.

"Release!" someone shouted, and there were other shouts as the cable snaked out and the receding glider wobbled against the blue, hindered by the bulk of the Horse hanging from its belly. "Release, Goddamn it!" a man yelled, and I was yelling too.

There was a sharp, ringing concussion as the winch halted and the cable snapped taut across the sky.

The glider stopped.

Just like that, it stopped dead in midair, out there across the water, linked to us by a rigid line of steel. After that instant it began to fall, slowly at first then faster — then the glider and cable hit the water at almost the same moment, a long slender splash across the Strait like the trail of a flying fish, culminating in the miniature eruption which marked the end of St. Clair.

There was nothing to do but winch him in.

It seemed all wrong. I felt we ought to have taken a boat out and dived for him — we should have expended some effort, we should have taken risks to recover him — but there was no point. Doug Marshall took the responsibility; he has always been the practical type. He thumbed the button, and the winch motor whined, and the cable began to scrap across the rounded pebbles — and presently a dark hump appeared in the shallow water ....

We moved forward with some vague idea of carrying him in, but Marshall kept right on winching, and St. Clair and the Horse ground up the beach and finally stopped on the grass beside us.

The ring of the release pin was still around St. Clair's finger. The pin was still in position, plugged through the bracket.

I think he must have blacked out with the acceleration, although we test people for such medical problems before they join the club. Somebody produced a knife and began to cut away the wetsuit. I don't know why. He soon stopped when he found that the wetsuit was the only thing holding St. Clair together.

For the rest of that summer the Catapult lay disused. Not because of respect for the memory of St. Clair — we don't think that way, here on the Peninsula. No, the Catapult is used mainly by learners, and learners scare easily. The rest of us continued sling-gliding from the boats, with the Hook, the Eye and the Whip, as though nothing had happened.

One sunny April afternoon in the following year a group of us stood at the clubhouse window discussing the program for the opening of the new sling-gliding

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season. Apart from Doug Marshall, Charles Wentworth and a handful of committee members, the lounge was empty; in fact the club had not yet officially opened and the room reeked of new paint, which did not help the flavor of my Scotch.

"Last season was, uh, most unfortunate," the secretary was saying. He is a small, precise man and his entire being radiated delicate distaste. "Too much acrimony, too many problems. And that woman didn't help either. We must make a fresh start." He sipped at his gin and tonic. "We must make a bold gesture."

I tried not to chuckle; the idea of Bryce Alcester making a bold gesture was almost unthinkable. "By 'that woman' you mean Carioca Jones, Bryce?" I asked. He and Carioca are notorious enemies.

The secretary started to splutter something but was drowned out by the booming voice of Walter Ramsbottom — a frequent fate of speakers at committee meetings. "Set fire to a glider and launch it from the Catapult — that's what we ought to do," he said. "Send it blazing into the sky..." His eyes gleamed with enthusiasm as he visualised the spectacle. "Maybe have it burst and scatter colored stars, like a rocket."

"You don't think that might frighten potential members?"

"Nonsense, man. It's symbolic. It carries the torch of man's courage into the skies, at the same time expunging the memory of the St. Clair business from the mind of the club. Phoenix rising from the ashes," concluded Ramsbottom vaguely but forcefully.

Alcester was unconvinced. "But can we assume that the spectators would understand that? They might think they're witnessing some terrible accident."

"We tell them, Goddamn it. We spell it out in the printed program. Come on!" Ramsbottom made for the door, and such was the force of his personality that the committee trailed after him. "Let's take a look at the Catapult and see what sort of repairs are needed!"

The Catapult was badly rusted but appeared structurally sound. The main damage was around the release mechanism on the Horse. As Ramsbottom pointed out, this didn't matter because a human pilot would not be involved. Some sort of simple hook could be rigged to disengage when the cable tightened, since safety was not important. With growing enthusiasm we discussed the matter; then suddenly Bryce Alcester caught my arm.

"Look over there! Isn't that your friend Miss Jones? I understood she'd been forbidden to enter the premises."

Carioca Jones was approaching along the seashore, accompanied

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by a tall man and a short woman whom I did not recognize. At her heels flopped Cholmondeley, her pet sawfish. The aging ex-3-V star was startlingly clad in a bright-blue sailor suit which would have looked fine on a woman half her age. "This is a new season, Bryce," I murmured. "Forget it, huh?"

But Alcester was strutting down to the water like a bantam cock, bristling. He halted on the pebbles, barring the progress of the Carioca Jones entourage. We edged closer, interested. "Are you aware that this is private property, madam?" he snapped.

"Who on earth do you think you are, you *weird* little man?"

"You know perfectly well that I'm the secretary of the Peninsula Sling-gliding Club, Miss Jones. You are trespassing. I must ask you to leave — and take your friends with you."

"Sling-gliding?" Carioca's tall compaion looked interested. "You didn't tell me you had sling-gliding here, Carioca."

But Carioca Jones didn't hear him, being in full spate. "If you would take the trouble to consult your lawyer, you nasty little man, you would find that you have no rights *whatsoever* over that area of beach which lies between the low and high tide marks — where we are now standing. If you want me to leave, then you must *throw* me out. And no doubt you would, if it were not for Mr. Wayne Traill here."

There was a murmur from the committee as we realized why Carioca's companion had looked familiar. Wayne Traill is rarely seen these days, of course, but at that time he was a familiar figure in the 3-V alcoves. He was the epitome of manhood, tall and muscular with fair hair and a deep voice; but what set him apart from his contemporary romantic heroes was his face. In no way could he be called handsome, but he was almost unbelievably rugged, with blue eyes deep-set beneath thick pale brows, a large strong nose and a wide trap of a mouth with more than the normal complement of flashing white teeth. His jaw was enormous, square like Superman's, and it scarcely moved as he spoke with bared lips from the 3-V alcoves in a billion homes, terrifying the villain with a laconic remark or making a deodorant commercial sound like the ascent of Everest.

Probably I have always hated him, but at the time I thought I merely despised him. He was not real; he was an image, possibly a robot constructed by the studio.

"Well, now, that's no way to speak to a lady," he said predictably, in measured tones, as Alcester said something justifiable to Carioca. "Just watch your tongue, man."

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He brushed the secretary aside and ambled towards us, stepping deliberately over the soggy ridge of detritus which denoted the high water mark. We fell back, even Ramsbottom. Traill must have been almost seven feet tall. He smiled at us with practiced charm. "So you're all the sling-gliders. It must have been, uh, five or six years ago I made a sling-gliding movie. *Arrows of Fortune*, remember it?" He chuckled, deep-throated. "That was some movie, huh?"

Doug Marshall was grinning too. "That scene where the Whip broke — how was it done? Christ, I wouldn't like to have been up there!"

"Practice. Practice and one helluva lot of luck," murmured Traill. The committee stood around in the silence between his words, waiting for more. Alcester and the other woman joined the group, together with Carioca — the unpleasantness was forgotten in the glow of Traill's personality. He fingered the twisted bracket on the Horse. "Glad I wasn't riding him when that baby jammed," he chuckled. "I reckon I might almost have been scared."

And they all laughed, forgetting St. Clair, because the notion of Wayne Traill being scared was so comical. "What say we all go have a drink, huh?" he said. "Looks like your clubhouse over there."

So we repaired to the bar, with Traill and Carioca and the other woman as guests of the club. I was gradually slipping out of the general pattern of behavior, sobering up despite the drinks as my generalized dislike of the type Traill stood for became more specific and directed at the big phony himself. I wished he would give some credit to his stuntman; I wished he would go to the washroom to at least prove he was human.

Suddenly he stood, and there was silence. "Well ... well," he said slowly. "I reckon .... Yup, I reckon I'll just have to go and take a leak."

Everybody chuckled, not really believing him as he strode purposefully toward the washroom. He was gone, and the room was dead.

"Well, it's certainly a surprise to see you here, Miss Jones," remarked Alcester into the quietness. "How is your, uh, organization?"

He was referring to the Foes of Bondage and the fact that Carioca had, on many occasions, publicly denounced the gliding club and its activities. Due to sling-gliding accidents one or two members had received grafts and transplants from compulsory donors at the state penitentiary. The Foes of Bondage were dedicated to the abolition of this and other services which state prisoners were compelled to perform.

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"Oh, Wayne is *so* interested in gliding that I would hate to disappoint him by refusing to enter this place." Carioca stared around disdainfully, as though seeing the room for the first time and not liking what she saw. "I *assure* you that by accepting a drink I am not condoning the activities of your members."

She reached down and tickled Cholmondeley's head near the spot where the oxygenator pulsed, and the sawfish thrashed dangerously. I lifted my foot from the floor in the nick of time.

Wayne Traill returned and the awkward moment was over. Life immediately returned to the party as he began to describe, with appropriate gestures, how he had piloted a stricken pinnace down to the surface of Phobos and achieved a perfect landing, thus saving the lives of the director and camera crew, not to mention himself. The glider pilots hung on his words, wide-eyed. Carioca Jones was smiling smugly and possessively. She was not wearing much make-up, presumably attempting an open-air look in emulation of Traill's appearance, but merely achieving a sad betrayal of her true age.

At some point during the afternoon it became apparent that the undistinguished woman who accompanied Traill was his wife. I spoke to her a couple of times and she seemed pleasant enough; her name was Irma. I felt sorry for her.

About a week later, Carioca Jones called me on the visiphone. I didn't recognize her at first; her transmitter has been rigged to give a slightly out-of-focus image, which I imagine she consideres more flattering. It certainly hides the wrinkles.

"Joe, *darling*," she gushed, "I have a rush job for you. Are you terribly busy these days?"

"Trade is quite brisk," I said guardedly. "But I'm sure I can fit you in. What do you want?" Probably the only reason I cultivate Carioca Jones is the business she sends my way.

"Actually, darling, it's not for me. It's for Wayne and Irma. We're having a little private housewarming party at The Stars next week, and if the weather was nice we thought we might do some sunbathing while we watch the sling-gliders practicing. But Wayne and Irma don't have any swimming things."

I tried not to look astonished. "Wayne Traill wants a pair of slitheskin swimming trucks?" A well-bred slitheskin has a smooth luster which reflects in changing color every motion of the wearer. I have long held the theory that only homosexuals wear slitheskin swimming trunks. I have rarely been proved wrong.

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"And Irma. I have a costume already, of course. Here are the measurements." She held a piece of paper up to the screen, and I copied down the blurred figures with some difficulty. Her face reappeared, and I gathered from a bright red area near the bottom that she was smiling girlishly. "Why don't you join us, Joe? Next Thursday, at The Stars, bring your own swimming thing or even *not* — we're very bohemian these days. I'd like you to see my new house."

I assured her I would do my best and hung up.

The following Tuesday afternoon I arrived at The Stars with some misgivings. A few workmen still pottered around, concreting paths and putting the finishing touches to Carioca's dream house, which, at the moment, looked much like a partially converted aerial crane — which it was. It was a large black rectangular structure sitting on a concrete plinth, rusted and with incongruous new windows set in its steel hull. The name of the previous owner was emblazoned on the side in huge, fading white letters:

CHARLESWORTH
ENTERPRISES
TRANSPORT SALVAGE
WRECKING
NO JOB TOO LARGE

"I bought it for a *song*, Joe," trilled Carioca Jones as I dismounted from my hovercar and she swept across the new lawn to greet me. "Isn't it just *too* fabulous?"

"It's a little, uh, stark, don't you think?" The vast object looked menacing on its plinth. "What's wrong with your ordinary house?"

"Oh, I still sleep in the old place." She glanced disdainfully at the towers of her palatial residence by the shore. "But this is so much more fun. Of course, it looks a little strange right now, but you just wait until it's all painted. It's finished inside, already."

She seized my hand in her soft grip, and I flinched at the touch, remembering something that happened a long time ago.

We climbed the short flight of steel steps and entered The Stars. I paused, astonished. No expense had been spared: the carpet was deep, the walls paneled with imported hardwoods, the ceiling coated with light-absorbing Ultrasorb in which tiny jewels glittered, giving the effect of vast distances. Emotion mobiles murmured quietly in alcoves, dispensing an air of restful opulence, soothing the senses with their play of light and sound. Carioca led me down a short corridor to a large sun lounge, still holding my hand in the flirtatious manner of an elderly woman who won't give up, watching me excitedly with her black eyes as I made appropriate sounds of amazement.

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The sun lounge looked over the Strait; the afternoon was bright and clear, and I could see as far as the mainland, where snow-capped mountains rose above the small islands.

There was a grunt from a nearby chair; Wayne Traill uncurled his long body and stood. He gripped my hand firmly, staring into my eyes. "Good to see you again, Joe." He held my hand a fraction too long, as though submitting me to some test of his own devising. Irma greeted me too. Then the three of them retired to put on their slitheskin swimming things, amid much anticipatory mirth, leaving me to the infinitely preferable company of a Scotch and ginger.

In due course they returned, highly delighted with their new apparel, which glowed pink in sympathy with their pleasure. Traill had an impressive physique which must have cost him many hours of toil at the parallel bars. Carioca looked much as she always did, an unfortunate contrast of well-preserved body but dissipated face. I was relieved to see that — contrary to her normal practice — she was wearing both halves of her bikini.

But the surprise was Irma. With the slitheskin glowing against her fair skin she had undergone a personality change and now moved confidently around the sun lounge, displaying a figure which was unexpectedly exotic. She caught me staring at her breasts, and the pink of her slitheskin deepened to sudden red: I looked away hastily, hoping the significance of this was lost on the others.

"Aren't you going to put on your things, Joe?" asked Carioca.

"I didn't bring them with me." I had no wish to be contrasted with the muscular Traill. "In any case, it's not very warm today."

Carioca seemed disappointed. For a while we drank while the workmen ambled about outside and Traill droned on about his adventures. Carioca sat close to him, from time to time uttering tinkles of laughter and gasps of admiration, while she gazed into his face. Irma lay on the other side of the room, apparently comatose. I began to doze off, relieved that my fears of an orgy were unfounded.

I was aroused by a booming from Traill. Carioca's voice sounded close in my ear.

"Joe, darling, slip out and fetch a bottle of Scotch from the house, will you? We seem to have run out."

I stumbled to my feet, still half asleep, made my way down the passage and out of the front door.

Unaccountably I missed my footing and began to fall. I snatched at the door jamb to save myself.

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And saw waves rippling against the shore, three hundred feet below me....

Fear punched me in the chest as I hung there, half out of the door, one foot on the step and the other in space while my fingers began to slip from the smooth metal.

A strong hand seized my wrists; a voice roared with laughter as I was snatched back into the corridor. I sank dizzily to the soft carpet.

After a while I looked up at them. Slitheskins pink with delight, Carioca and Traill grinned at me. Traill struck me forcibly on the back. "Hope we didn't scare you, Joe. Quite forgot we'd lifted off."

"You've gone all white, Joe," Carioca Jones laughed.

"You bastards," I muttered, feeling sick. I could still see that fearful drop, still feel myself falling, falling....

They watched me — pure, simple delight on their faces. Good clean fun. "I need a drink," I said, standing shakily.

"You wouldn't have fallen, of course," Traill told me later, as we watched the sling-gliders below. A boat raced for the Fulcrum post, a long white feather on the blue water, snapped into its turn and centrifugal force slung the accompanying glider into a fast climb. The bright yellow craft rose in a wide turn, spiraling towards us and, at the point of stalling, passed the open balcony where we stood. The pilot grinned at us, flat on his stomach within the rudimentary ten-foot fuselage, then fell away in a long shallow dive. We saw him land near the beach in a puff of spray. "The antigravity field extends a little beyond the edges of the hull," Traill explained.

"It's an old aerial crane, isn't it?" I asked. I was recovering, now. I'd seen similar craft in action before, at the old spaceport at Pacific North-West. Due to the almost one-hundred percent efficiency of the antigravity units, they have a prodigious lifting capability.

"It was a real bargain, Joe," Carioca said. "Look." She pointed down. Near her old house I could see a number of grey objects of varying sizes and shapes. "All sorts of equipment came with it. Wayne says I can sell that stuff down there for more than I paid for everything."

"The lasers alone are worth the money," said Traill knowledgeably. "There are four heavy-duty units down there, designed to cut through spaceship hulls — this crane belonged to a wrecking company. As soon as I saw it at the auction I thought of Carioca. I could see the possibilities."

"It was your idea, was it?" I was trying to be pleasant, but I was through with Traill. I would see the

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afternoon through for the sake of getting paid for the beachwear. Then, I told myself, I wouldn't come near The Stars again until Traill had left, if ever. "Have you had the antigrav units checked over? I asked.

"I have contacts in the trade," he said. "Come with me." He led the way down a narrow passage and opened a door. There was stark metal everywhere; this was the functional side of The Stars which I imagined Carioca rarely visited. There was a large console encrusted with dials and switches. We were in the original control room of the crane; there was a faint hum from the antigravity units. They sounded healthy enough, but then I had no idea how they ought to sound. "The units have all been reconditioned; they're guaranteed for a hundred thousand hours," Traill assured me.

"What about Carioca? I wouldn't like to think of her getting her hands on the instruments."

He laughed, much too loudly for the small room. "She never has to touch them. The fields are permanently energized at one-hundredth power — enough to lift us off. She doesn't even know how to switch them off. I've told her to leave that console strictly alone — it's safer that way. I scare easily."

And again that damned laugh, contradicting the confession.

"I'm sure you do."

"Take a look at this." There was a red lever on the wall, freshly painted. "I've impressed on Carioca that this is all she must touch. This is the original winch. The grapnel cable is anchored to the ground." He thumbed a switch, and an area of floor slid away, revealing a square window. I could see the cable trailing down to the ground, far below. Traill threw the switch, a motor whirred. Visibly, we began to descend. "You see? There's enough power in the winch to overcome the reduced power of the antigrav units. Whether Carioca wants to go up or down, all she has to use is the winch."

We reached the ground. It seemed a good moment to leave them. I stepped off and watched as The Stars rose into the sky again, Carioca waving gaily from the balcony. A sudden thought occurred to me; I thought of Carioca alone up there, incapable of operating the antigrav controls, while down here stood an enemy ....

The cable disappeared into a large square pit in the concrete plinth. I walked across, looked down. A massive shackle tethered the cable to a huge ring set in the solid concrete. Around the ring lay a number of sinuous forms. Cold eyes regarded me as I backed away from the edge, oxygenators pulsed

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near gill slits.

The pit was full of guard sharks. As the brutes watched me, their quickened breathing triggered implanted sonic alarms, and a shrill howling burst from their open mouths. I walked away hurriedly.

Carioca Jones was taking no chances.

A week or two later there was another committee meeting at the clubhouse. Ramsbottom was still pushing the idea of the blazing glider, but the more we discussed it, the more it became apparent that we were nervous about the connotations.

"To me it suggests, uh, death," murmured Wormald, our lawyer. "That's the last thing we want to suggest. Our standpoint has always been that piloting a sling-glider is as safe as crossing the road, if not safer. We let the press and the Foes scream about perils and disasters, while we go quietly and modestly about our hobby. Unfortunately our public image has been soured by the mud-slingers. What we really need on the opening day is a good rousing speech from a public figure, stressing service to the community, adventure for youth, Man's conquest of the last frontier: himself. We all know the sort of thing."

"Better to strap Carioca Jones into the blazing glider," mumbled Ramsbottom disgruntledly, conscious that the tide was turning against him.

Without being fully aware of what I was thinking, I said:

"Why don't we ask Wayne Traill to make an inaugural flight from the Catapult?"

There was a murmur of excitement at this, although Doug Marshall was eyeing me closely. "Yes, why don't we, Joe?" he asked.

We'd all had several drinks by that time. "Because the big punk would be scared, that's why," I said recklessly.

There was a chorus of disagreement. I sobered up to the realization that everyone was against me — which is a disconcerting realization to sober up to.

"Perhaps you'll tell us what you have against Traill, Joe," suggested Wormald. "He's intimated that he can be of great help to the club."

"Nothing. I'm sorry. I spoke out of line."

Bryce Alcester was looking bewildered. He tapped on the table. "I can't pretend to understand the undercurrents of all this, but Joe's idea seems a good one. May I have your agreement, gentlemen, that we approach Wayne Traill along those lines?"

The motion was carried. I was asked to contact Traill on behalf of the club, since I knew him better than anyone.

I stopped the hovercar near the

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concrete plinth and stepped out; it was evening, gathering darkness, and The Stars a black rectangle against the crimson-flushed sky. I stepped onto the plinth, avoiding the debris left by the contractors who had still not completely finished the job. The land sharks sensed my approach and set up a faint whining as they shifted restlessly. The offshore breeze was chilly and I shivered suddenly, huddling within my jacket and searching for the communicator among the dark shapes of the cement mixers and wheelbarrows. I heard a murmur of ethereal music from above; Carioca was playing her orchestrella.

There was a sound nearby, a clatter from among the used wrecking gear which Carioca hoped to sell. I saw a dim figure approaching. "Who the hell's that?" I snapped nervously.

"Oh... that sounds like Joe Sagar." It was a woman's voice.

"Is that you, Irma?"

She stood beside me, her face pale against the darkness. "I've been down to the house," she said in a small voice. "I went out for a walk some time ago, and when I came back, The Stars was up in the air again and I couldn't make anyone hear. How are you supposed to contact them, when they're up in that thing?"

"There's a communicator somewhere around. It looks like a visiphone. When the cementing's all finished it'll be fixed in position, but right now it might be anywhere. I've been trying to find it."

"I do wish they'd come down. I... I don't like it up in that thing, Joe. It scares me."

"Me too. What does Wayne say?"

"Oh...well, you know what he's like. He loves it. He's been helping Carioca fix it up. I don't know when it'll ever be finished...."

"You want to go back home?" I asked sympathetically. I was sorry for her. Fortunately they would be leaving soon, I understood.

She murmured something and we searched the vicinity. Eventually we located the communicator in a small shed, contacted Carioca, and watched in silence as The Stars descended towards us. The craft grounded, the door opened and light flooded out. Irma and I entered, blinking. It was warm inside, and despite the late hour Carioca wore her slitheskin bikini; it glowed crimson. Irma barely glanced at her as she walked past to the sun lounge where Traill, also lightly clad, relaxed on a chesterfield.

"For Christ's sake, get some clothes on, Carioca," I muttered. "What the hell is she going to think?"

"What that *boring* little girl

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thinks is no concern of mine. Joe," she retorted. "If she thinks at all."

I shrugged and went into the sun lounge where Wayne Traill and his wife were confronting each other. "I can't help it if you couldn't find the communicator, Irma," Traill was saying.

"But I've been down there for hours. Didn't you wonder what had happened to me? I mean, you might at least have come down to see where I was. I could have fallen in among the land sharks, for all you seem to care."

Unpleasantness was developing and so I interrupted, while pouring myself a Scotch. "I hear you're leaving soon, Wayne. I hope you're not going to miss the opening day of the gliding."

"Leaving?" he looked puzzled.

"The series, darling," hissed Irma. "You remember the series."

"Oh, yes, the series. Yes. As a matter of fact," he grinned at us, "I called the studio tonight, and they said the series has been postponed. So it looks as though Carioca will have to put up with us for a few weeks more."

"I...I..." Irma was stammering; her lips were trembling like a child's — but there was adult murder in her eyes. "I'm *sure* Carioca wouldn't mind that," she said at last.

And from then on the atmosphere deteriorated, if that were possible. I left as soon as I could, after confirming that Traill intended to be at the opening of the gliding season. I said we wanted him to say a few words. I didn't mention the inaugural flight....

For some unfathomable reason, the opening Saturday of the sling-gliding season is invariably a fine day, and this year was no exception. The slipway was abustle with activity as the pilots and crew prepared the boats and equipment, while, nearby, the hovercars were arriving and the crowds assembling on the seawall.

The Foes of Bondage were there, a phalanx of militant womanhood shouting slogans and waiting for someone to get hurt. In recent months they had been concentrating their attacks on the principle of compulsory organ donation by state prisoner. It would be a wasted day for them if no pilot were injured seriously enough to require a transplant or graft. It is the lot of the abolitionist to thrive on the very diet he professes to abhor.

The Stars hung in the sky, a short distance down the coast. Obviously Carioca Jones — President of the Foes of Bondage — could not appear with her followers this day because Wayne Traill would be here. Rather than choose sides, she had wisely decided to stay away altogether.

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Neither Wayne nor Irma had arrived by one o'clock, and we began to get nervous. We stood around the Catapult while the boiler simmered and a maintenance man struggled to fix the broken harness. It was typical of the organization of the Club that this job had been left until the last moment.

"It would be most unfortunate if Traill were to be injured," twittered Alcester. He glanced towards the Foes.

"Traill can handle himself," said Ramsbottom. In recent days he had dropped his campaign for the blazing glider.

"Don't be a fool, Walter," snapped Doug Marshall. Doug is normally the most equable of men, which shows how tense we all were. "If the release jams at a hundred and sixty, there's no man alive who can handle it."

I was glad that there was at least one other man among us who didn't look upon Traill as a god. At that moment the murmur of the crowd changed to a buzz of interest. "Here he is," said someone.

Traill was so damned tall that we could see his head from afar, gleaming golden in the sun as he moved through the crowd. When he passed the main body of onlookers, even the Foes of Bondage were silent; then there was a ragged burst of clapping. He glanced at his watch as he strode towards us, smiling broadly, his chin like a bulldozer. Odd members of the crowd were trailing after him now, crossing the private property like flotsam drawn along in the wake of a yacht.

"Plenty of time, huh?" he boomed as he arrived among us. "Great day for gliding, huh? We should have a film unit here. Hello there, Joe. What's this, Bryce? Fixing the old Catapult up, huh?"

"I trust it will be ready in time," replied Alcester primly.

I think Traill was too much for Alcester. I honestly think he was too much for each one of them, severally; but they wouldn't admit it to one another. The members of the club were at last beginning to realize that the man was overpowering, that he had the knack of putting you on the defensive. I had a hunch that each committee member thought: I don't like Traill but I'm scared to say so because everybody else except Joe Sagar dotes on the man — and everyone knows Sagar is a cynical bastard who doesn't like *anyone*....

"You're using the Catapult this afternoon?" queried Traill.

And so the big moment had arrived.

And I suddenly found myself wishing I hadn't organized this little drama ....

"Well, of course." Alcester

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looked doubtful. "It's understood that you make the inaugural flight ...isn't it?"

There was a small puzzled silence around the Catapult as the perfect moment began to coalesce...

"What!" roared Traill. "In that thing? You've gotta be joking, man!" He chuckled hugely as he spoke; there was no embarrassment, no timidity. "I tell you this—" He allowed his amused gaze to play on each of us in turn. "It scares me, man. Yup, that thing scares me. Two years ago I swore I'd never strap myself into another glider — and the sight of that rig tells me I was right. Yes, sir." He shuddered, comically.

And they laughed....

Of course Wayne Traill was right — it was insane to contemplate being thrown into the sky from that rig. The Catapult had killed before and it could kill again. Wayne Traill ought to know, if anyone ought. He probably knew more about sling-gliding than any man there. They must have been crazy ever to have made the suggestion.

Wait a moment....Wasn't it Joe Sagar who had made the suggestion?

Alcester was the first to stop chuckling. "It seems there's been a misunderstanding," he said jovially, glancing sharply at me meanwhile.

"You're darn right there has," boomed Traill. "But let it go. Let it go. Now — I just wanted to run over the theme of my address — you know, to make sure I don't tread on any toes...."

And the moment was over, gone, forgotten; and somebody handed the maintenance man a beer as he downed tools with relief; and the committee were discussing the finer points of Traill's speech, deferentially, because, after all, Traill probably knew more about public speaking than any man there....

The crowd buzzed with interest....

And I was on the outside looking in, my perfect moment gone. Just for one savage instant I swore silently at the injustice — but then I realized the simple truth that Traill was too good for me, and Irma was a born loser, and there was nothing I or justice could do about it.

The hubbub from the crowd grew, and it was borne in on us that something was afoot. We looked around, looked up, and forgot Traill's speech.

The Stars was adrift.

The gaunt black shape was sliding across the sky, visibly, trailing a length of cable, the end of which scattered leaves from a nearby tree before swinging higher, over the water. Carioca Jones stood on

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the balcony; we could see the whiteness of her face as she stared frantically down. The sound of her screaming reached us faintly.

Doug Marshall was already running for the clubhouse. "I'll call the ambulopter!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"How far away is the hospital?" asked Traill, watching the ascending Stars.

"Almost twenty miles away, in Louise." I tried to gauge the rate of ascent. "By the time it gets here, Carioca will be beyond its maximum ceiling. Does she have any oxygen? We could call the mainland. Maybe they could get an antigrav here from Sentry Down in time."

"I doubt it," said Traill, nevertheless taking charge and sending Alcester scurrying to the clubhouse to call the spaceport. As he spoke, he began to strap himself into the harness of a nearby glider.

The crowd had quieted. Again we heard Carioca's voice, faintly from the sky. I couldn't bear to look up at her, and so I watched Traill. The 3-V star had strapped on the glider and was now making his way to the Catapult in a shuffling crouch.

He was going to do something stupid, something only Wayne Traill could have thought of. With relief I remembered that the release mechanism was broken. Traill would have to save his heroics for another occasion.

"Joe!" He addressed me, and there was a certain amount of strain in his face. "Stand by the launching lever, will you?" He straddled the Horse and leaned forwards, wrapping his arms around the chinrest, wriggling into the launching position and thrusting his legs back into the narrow tube of the fuselage.

"Get off there, Traill," I said tiredly. "There's nothing you can do. This isn't a movie, you know. Not even you could hang onto the Horse, when the acceleration hits. The release mechanism's broken, the pin got all bent up when St. Clair died. Come and have a drink and let's wait for the antigrav from Sentry Down. I understand how you feel, man."

"I said stand by the lever, Joe."

And he eased his body sideways, inched himself to and fro, and lined up the holes in the bracket with the hole on his harness....

Then he pushed his forefinger firmly through, and his hand tightened white on the bright steelwork.

With his left hand he resumed his grip on the chinrest.

"Fire!" he snapped.

So I pulled the lever, and Wayne Traill roared down the short track towards the ocean.

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Again there was the abrupt silence as the glider, with Horse attached, left the end of the track and leaped unsteadily into the air. I tried not to think — but back to me came the image of St. Clair stopping in midair as the release jammed. But I knew this could not happen to Traill. Whatever else might befall his insane and melodramatic rescue bid, his release would certainly not jam....

The Horse dropped away, an everyday sight, and fell into the cold water of the Strait with an unnoticed splash. I made no attempt to start the winch. We were all too engrossed in following the tiny climbing dart — and, besides, I wanted the scavengers of the ocean to have their chance with that release mechanism before we wound it ashore .... Meanwhile, Traill rocketed into the sky, fast and steep.

The stars looked far off, impossibly high against the blue sky. Someone was gripping my arm, shaking me. "Who's that? For God's sake, tell me, Joe!" I shook the arm off; it was distracting me.

"He'll never make it," someone was muttering. "He'll never make it. Nobody could make it."

Doug Marshall and Bryce Alcester were beside me, panting after their run from the clubhouse. "What the hell's going on, Joe? Who's the maniac?"

The glider was slowing visibly now, as it closed on The Stars. Traill wasn't going to make it. "That's Traill up there," I said shortly.

There was a scream of utter desolation from beside me. "No! For God's sake, no! He'll be killed, because of her!" Shocked, I found Irma standing beside me, her face a twisted wreck as she stared into the sky.

Ramsbottom was explaining to the world, droning on compulsively. "There's no way he can land, you see. There's no place to set down. He'll stall and start to spin, and there's no way you can pull a sling-glider out of a spin, you don't have the control surfaces. He's a brave man — oh Christ, he's a hell of a brave man, but he's going to be killed, he's going to get himself killed...."

"For Christ's sake, shut up!" yelled a tense voice nearby.

Traill stalled. It was difficult to tell his exact position in relation to The Stars — but we saw him stall, we saw him begin to flutter back towards us.

Then he dropped out of sight, obscured by the bulk of The Stars.

We waited, but Traill did not reappear. Incredible as it seemed, he had landed on The Stars.

"He's made it!" shouted somebody.

There was a huge roar of relief

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from the crowd. I felt a pain in my upper arm and looked down; Irma's fingers were locked like talons into my flesh. I prized them away gently, shocked by the expression on her face as she stared with empty eyes into the sky.

Somebody was tapping me on the shoulder, a man in uniform. The ambulopter had arrived. "Shall I stand by?" the man asked.

I forced myself to think. "You'd better notify the Organ Pool to have a donor ready," I said. "That man will have lost the forefinger from his right hand."

The attendant spoke briefly into a portable visiphone. The slack end of the cable swung overhead, and I ducked, but it was some distance above us. I wondered how it could possibly have become detached from its fitting in the concrete pit, with the guard sharks there.

The crowd was cheering itself dizzy. The Stars drifted gently down to the beach, with Carioca and Traill waving from the balcony like royalty. We moved towards them.

"My dears, I was *petrified.*" I could hear Carioca trilling long before I got near. "I truly thought my last moments had come. And then this wonderful man came swooping from the skies like a knight in shining armor...."

There was a livid bruise on Traill's forehead. He was grinning, without showmanship and without false modesty either — I could not fault his performance. He saw us and detached himself from the clinging fans. I caught sight of a white dressing on his hand.

"The ambulopter's here," I said. The uniformed attendant stepped up.

"I've arranged for a donor at the state prison, Mr. Traill," he said. "We'll have you there in a few minutes. Perhaps you'll come this way."

Traill shook him off, holding up his hand. The place, the stump of the right forefinger was neatly dressed with Rediseel. "Carioca dressed it for me," he said. "It'll be fine."

"But... you'll be needing a finger, Mr. Traill," said the attendant, bewildered. "I mean, particularly in your line of business...."

Traill smiled. "My hand will be fine, thanks," he repeated firmly.

Then Irma managed to fight her way to his side, and they kissed.

One of the problems I encounter when chronicling events on the Peninsula is that by their very nature these events are inconclusive, since the people concerned live on, and much takes place offstage, so to speak. So that I am never able to say, definitely: This is how it ended.

So it was with the episode of

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Wayne Traill and his wife Irma. The best I can do is relate a conversation of the night before their return to "civilization," as they termed it.

Carioca threw a small farewell party at her house, and by the early hours of the morning there were just four of us left, drinking and talking in desultory fashion. We sat in the large room of her ordinary house; the room with the spiral staircase and the sedimentary floor set with polished fossils.

"Are you intending to use The Stars again, Carioca?" I asked.

"Why, certainly, Joe. Just as soon as I sell the junk and have the final fittings installed...."

I could understand her reluctance to use the house before the junk, as she called it, was removed. That junk included several powerful wrecking lasers. When the police investigated the cause of the breakaway of The Stars, they had found one of those huge lasers still warm....

Carioca and Wayne were reminiscing, Irma was staring white-faced out of the window, and I began to think it was time I was going. "I'll never forget the day you first arrived at the studio, darling," Carioca was saying dreamily, looking into her gin-and-orange, black eyes faraway. "*Such* a puny little thing. All you had was your face and voice. Still, they soon changed all that...." She looked directly at Irma. "Of course, you never *knew* Wayne before he had all the, uh, *star treatment,* did you, darling?"

Irma flushed and was silent. She looked ten years older.

Wayne said in his deep, slow voice, "We've all of us been young, and I expect we've all had our ambitions. I wanted to be a star. It seemed I didn't have all the necessary qualities, and so they gave me this body." He was staring at me, wanting me to understand. "Bit by bit...."

I was drunk. "A little man in a big body? And you find you have to live up to it?"

"I wouldn't say that. I'd say, rather, that I've been trying to live it down.... You see, Joe, the time comes when you've achieved your ambitions, and you take time to look back and work out how it happened — and that's when you have time to start feeling ashamed. That was when I started doing all my own stunts...."

"You mean you did all those crazy things *yourself?*" I remembered some of the Wayne Traill 3-V's I'd seen, and I shivered. "You could have killed yourself, man."

"It's strange, the things guilt can do. Maybe I wanted to be killed. Maybe I felt I ought to pay, in some way, for my arms and legs and so on. Because one thing I knew — I was never going to use

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the Organ Pool again."

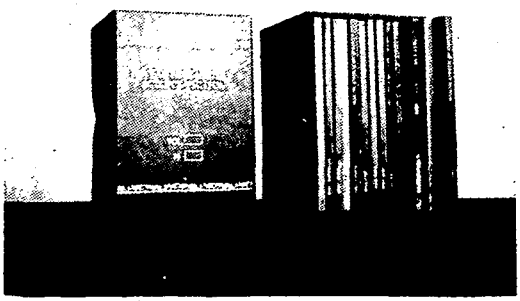
I caught sight of the expression on Carioca Jones' face as she glanced at Irma, then Traill — and I was shocked. There was gloating possession in those black eyes.

Of course, Carioca Jones must have realized what was happening the moment The Stars went adrift, and she must have looked down and seen *somebody* hurrying away from the laser....But she hadn't told the police.

Not yet.

I looked at Wayne Traill — the small, brave, ordinary man in the flashy body — and I looked at Irma, who loved him.

And at last I knew enough to feel sorry for them both.



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Avram Davidson's welcome new story is certainly one of the most atmospheric sf or fantasy stories ever written. Mr. Davidson tells us that he has "traveled on and around the Spanish Main and its coasts," which accounts in part for the rich and colorful background of these Caribbean adventures of one Jack Limekiller.

Manatee Gal Ain't You Coming Out Tonight

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

The Cupid Club was the only waterhole on the Port Cockatoo waterfront. To be sure, there were two or three liquor booths back in the part where the tiny town ebbed away into the bush. But they were closed for siesta, certainly. And they sold nothing but watered rum and warm soft-drinks and loose cigarettes. Also, they were away from the breezes off the Bay which kept away the flies. In British Hidalgo gnats were flies, mosquitoes were flies, sand-flies — worst of all — were flies — *flies* were also flies: and if anyone were inclined to question this nomenclature, there was the unquestionable fact that mosquito itself was merely Spanish for little fly.

It was not really cool in the Cupid Club (Alfonso Key, prop., LICENSED TO SELL WINE, SPIRITS, BEER, ALE, CYDER AND PERRY). But it was certainly less hot than outside. Outside the sun burned the Bay, turning it into molten sparkles. Limekiller's boat stood at mooring, by very slightly raising his head he could see her, and every so often he did raise it. There wasn't much aboard to tempt thieves, and there weren't many thieves in Port Cockatoo, anyway. On the other hand, what was aboard the *Sacarissa* he could not very well spare; and it only took one thief, after all. So every now and then he did raise his head and make sure that no small boat was out by his own. No skiff or dory.

Probably the only thief in town was taking his own siesta.

"Nutmeg P'int," said Alfonso Key. "You been to Nutmeg P'int?"

"Been there."

Every place needs another place to make light fun of. In King Town, the old colonial capital, it was Port Cockatoo. Limekiller wondered what it was they made fun of, down at Nutmeg Point.

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"What brings it into your mind, Alfonso?" he asked, taking his eyes from the boat. All clear. Briefly he met his own face in the mirror. Wasn't much of a face, in his own opinion. Someone had once called him "Young Count Tolstoy." Wasn't much point in shaving, anyway.

Key shrugged. "Sometimes somebody goes down there, goes up the river, along the old bush trails, buys carn. About now, you know, mon, carn bring good price, up in King Town."

Limekiller knew that. He often did think about that. He could quote the prices Brad Welcome paid for corn: white corn, yellow corn, cracked and ground. "I know," he said. "In King Town they have a lot of money and only a little corn. Along Nutmeg River they have a lot of corn and only a little money. Someone who brings down money from the Town can buy corn along the Nutmeg. Too bad I didn't think of that before I left."

Key allowed himself a small sigh. He knew that it wasn't any lack of thought, and that Limekiller had had no money before he left, or, likely, he wouldn't have left. "May-be they trust you down along the Nutmeg. They trust old Bob Blaine. Year after year he go up the Nutmeg, he go up and down the bush trail, he buy carn on credit, bring it back up to King *Town.*"

Off in the shadow at the other end of the barroom someone began to sing, softly.

W'ol' Bob Blaine, he done gone.
W'ol' Bob Blaine, he done gone.
Ahl, ahl me money gone —
Gone to Spahnish Hidalgo....

In King Town, Old Bob Blaine had sold the corn, season after season. Old Bob Blaine had bought salt, he had bought shotgun shells, canned milk, white flour, cotton cloth from the Turkish merchants. Fish hooks, sweet candy, rubber boots, kerosene, lamp *chim*ney. Old Bob Blaine had returned and paid for corn in kind — not, to be sure, immediately after selling the corn. Things did not move that swiftly even today, in British Hidalgo, and certainly had not Back When. Old Bob Blaine returned with the merchandise on his next buying trip. It was more convenient, he did not have to make so many trips up and down the mangrove coast. By and by it must almost have seemed that he was paying in advance, when he came, buying corn down along the Nutmeg River, the boundary between the Colony of British Hidalgo and the country which the Colony still called Spanish Hidalgo, though it had not been Spain's for a century and a half.

"Yes mon," Alfonso Key agreed. "Only, that one last time, he *not*

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come bock. They say he buy one marine engine yard, down in Republican waters."

"I heard," Limekiller said, "that he bought a garage down there."

The soft voice from the back of the bar said, "No, mon. Twas a coconut walk he bought. Yes, mon."

Jack wondered why people, foreign people, usually, sometimes complained that it was difficult to get information in British Hidalgo. In his experience, information was the easiest thing in the world, there — all the information you wanted. In fact, sometimes you could get more than you wanted. Sometimes, of course, it was contradictory. Sometimes it was outright wrong. But that, of course, was another matter.

"Anybody else ever take up the trade down there?" Even if the information, the answer, if there was an answer, even if it were negative, what difference would it make?

"No," said Key. "No-body. May-be you try, eh, Jock? May-be they trust you."

There was no reason why the small cultivators, slashing their small cornfields by main force out of the almighty bush and then burning the slash and then planting corn in the ashes, so to speak — maybe they would trust him, even though there was no reason *why* they should trust him. Still.... Who knows.... They might. They just might. Well.... some of them just might. For a moment a brief hope rose in his mind.

"Naaa.... I haven't even got any crocus sacks." There wasn't much point in any of it after all. Not if he'd have to tote the corn wrapped up in his shirt. The jute sacks were fifty cents apiece in local currency; they were as good as money, sometimes even better than money.

Key, who had been watching rather unsleepingly as these thoughts were passing through Jack's mind, slowly sank back in his chair. "Ah," he said, very softly. "You haven't got any crocus sack."

"Een de w'ol' days," the voice from the back said, "every good 'oman, she di know which bush yerb good fah wyes, fah kid-ney, which bush yerb good fah heart, which bush yerb good fah fever. But ahl of dem good w'ol' 'omen, new, dey dead, you see. Yes mon. Ahl poss ahway. No-body know bush medicine nowadays. Only *bush-doc-tor*. And dey very few, sah, very few."

"What you say, Captain Cudgel, you not bush *doc*-tor you w'own self? Nah true, Coptain?"

Slowly, almost reluctantly, the old man answered. "Well sah. Me know few teeng. Fah true. Me know few teeng. Not like in w'ol' days. In w'ol' days, me dive fah conch. Yes mon. Fetch up plan-ty conch. De

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sahlt wah-tah hort me wyes, take bush-yerb fah cure dem. But no-mah. No, mon. Me no dive no mah. Ahl de time, me wyes hort, stay out of strahng sun now.... Yes mon...."

Limekiller yawned, politely, behind his hand. To make conversation, he repeated something he had heard. "They say some of the old-time people used to get herbs down at Cape Manatee."

Alfonso Key flashed him a look. The old man said, a different note suddenly in his voice, different from the melancholy one of a moment before, "Mon-ah-*tee*. Mon-ah-*tee* is hahf-*mon*, you know, sah. Fah true. Yes sah, mon-ah-*tee* is hahf-*mon*. Which reason de lah w'only allow you to tehk one mon-ah-*tee* a year."

Covertly, Jack felt his beer. Sure enough, it was warm. Key said, "Yes, but who even bother nowadays? The leather is so tough you can't even sole a boot with it. And you dasn't bring the meat up to the Central Market in King *Town*, you *know*."

The last thing on Limekiller's mind was to apply for a license to shoot manatee, even if the limit were one a week. "How come?" he asked. "How come you're not?" King Town. King Town was the reason that he was down in Port Cockatoo. There was no money to be made here, now. But there was none to be lost here, either. His creditors were all in King Town, though if they wanted to, they could reach him even down here. But it would hardly be worth anyone's while to fee a lawyer to come down and feed him during the court session. Mainly, though, it was a matter of, Out of sight, somewhat out of mind. And, anyway — who knows? The Micawber Principle was weaker down here than up in the capital. But still and all: something might turn up.

"Because, they say it is because Manatee have teats like a woman."

"One time, you know, one time dere is a mahn who mehk mellow wit ah mon-ah-tee, yes sah. And hahv pickney by mon-ah-tee." It did seem that the old man had begun to say something more, but someone else said, *"Ha-ha-ha!"* And the same someone else next said, in a sharp, all-but-demanding voice, "Shoe *shine?* Shoe *shine?*"

"I don't have those kind of shoes," Limekiller told the boy.

"Suede *brush?* Suede *brush?*"

Still no business being forthcoming, the bootblack withdrew, muttering.

Softly, the owner of the Cupid Club murmured, "That is one bod bobboon."

Limekiller waited, then he said, "I'd like to hear more about that, Captain Cudgel ...."

But the story of the man who "made mellow" with a manatee

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and fathered a child upon her would have to wait, it seemed, upon another occasion. Old Captain Cudgel had departed, via the back door. Jack decided to do the same, via the front.

The sun, having vexed the Atlantic coast most of the morning and afternoon, was now on its equal way towards the Pacific. The Bay of Hidalgo stretched away on all sides, out to the faint white line which marked the barrier reef, the great coral wall which had for so long safeguarded this small, almost forgotten nation for the British Crown and the Protestant Religion. To the south, faint and high and blue against the lighter blue of the sky, however faint, darker: Pico Guapo, in the Republic of Hidalgo. Faint, also, though recurrent, was Limekiller's thought that he might, just might, try his luck down there. His papers were in order. Port Cockatoo was a Port of Entry and of Exit. The wind was free.

But from day to day, from one hot day to another hot day, he kept putting the decision off.

He nodded politely to the District Commissioner and the District Medical Officer and was nodded to, politely, in return. A way down the front street strolled white-haired Mr. Stuart, who had come out here in The Year Thirty-Nine, to help the war effort, and had been here ever since: too far for nodding. Coming from the market shed where she had been buying the latest eggs and ground-victuals was good Miss Gwen; if she saw him she would insist on giving him his supper at her boarding-house on credit: her suppers (her breakfasts and lunches as well) were just fine. But he had debts enough already. So, with a sigh, and a fond recollection of her fried fish, her country-style chicken, and her candied breadfruit, he sidled down the little lane, and he avoided Miss Gwen.

One side of the lane was the one-story white-painted wooden building with the sign DENDRY WASHBURN, LICENCED TO SELL DRUGS AND POISONS, the other side of the lane was the one-story white-painted wooden building where Captain Cumberbatch kept shop. The lane itself was paved with the crushed decomposed coral called pipeshank — and, indeed, the stuff did look like so much busted-up clay pipe stems. At the end of the lane was a small wharf and a flight of steps, at the bottom of the steps was his skiff.

He poled out to his boat, where he was greeted by his first mate, Skippy, an off-white cat with no tail. Skippy was very neat, and always used the ashes of the caboose: and if Jack didn't remember to sweep them *out* of the caboose as

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soon as they had cooled, and off to one side, why, that was his own carelessness, and no fault of Skippy's.

"All clear?" he asked the small tiger, as it rubbed against his leg. The small tiger growled something which might have been "Portuguese man o'war off the starboard bow at three bells," or "Musketmen to the futtock-shrouds," or perhaps only, "Where in the Hell have *you* been, all day, you creep?"

"Tell you what, Skip," as he tied the skiff, untied the *Sacarissa,* and, taking up the boat's pole, leaned against her in a yo-heave-ho manner; "let's us bugger off from this teeming tropical metropolis and go timely down the coast... say, to off Crocodile Creek, lovely name, proof there really is no Chamber of Commerce in these parts... then take the dawn tide and drop a line or two for some grunts or jacks or who knows what... sawfish, maybe ...maybe..... *some*thing to go with the rice-and-beans tomorrow.... Corn what we catch but can't eat," he grunted, leaned, hastily released his weight and grabbed the pole up from the sucking bottom, dropped it on deck, and made swift shift to raise sail; *slap/slap/....* and then he took the tiller.

"And *thennn...* Oh, shite and onions, *I* don't know. Out to the Welshman's Cayes, maybe."

"Harebrained idea if ever I heard one," the first mate growled, trying to take Jack by the left great-toe. "Why don't you cut your hair and shave that beard and get a job and get drunk, like any decent, civilized son of a bitch would do?"

The white buildings and red roofs and tall palms wavering along the front street, the small boats riding and reflecting, the green mass of the bush behind: all contributed to give Port Cockatoo and environs the look and feel of a South Sea Island. Or, looked at from the viewpoint of another culture, the District Medical Officer (who was due for a retirement which he would not spend in his natal country), said that Port Cockatoo was "*gemütlich.*" It was certainly a quiet and a gentle and undemanding sort of place.

But, somehow, it did not seem the totally ideal place for a man not yet thirty, with debts, with energy, with uncertainties, and with a thirty-foot boat.

A bright star slowly detached itself from the darkening land and swam up and up and then stopped and swayed a bit. This was the immense kerosene lamp which was nightly swung to the top of the great flagpole in the Police yard: it could be seen, the local Baymen assured J. Limekiller, as far out as Serpent Caye.... Serpent Caye, the impression was, lay hard upon the very verge of the known and habit-

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able earth, beyond which the River Ocean probably poured its stream into The Abyss.

Taking the hint, Limekiller took his own kerosene lamp, by no means immense, lit it, and set it firmly between two chocks of wood. Technically, there should have been two lamps and of different colors. But the local vessels seldom showed any lights at all. "He see me forst, he blow he conch-*shell;* me see *he* forst, me blow *my* conch-shell." And if neither saw the other. "Well, we suppose to meet each othah ..." And if they didn't? Well, there was Divine Profidence — hardly any lives were lost from such misadventures: unless, of course, someone was drunk.

The dimlight lingered and lingered to the west, and then the stars started to come out. It was time, Limekiller thought, to stop for the night.

He was eating his rice and beans and looking at the chart when he heard a voice nearby saying, "Sheep a-high!"

Startled, but by no means alarmed, he called out, "Come aboard!"

What came aboard first was a basket, then a man. A man of no great singularity of appearance, save that he was lacking one eye. "Me name," said the man, "is John Samuel, barn in dis very Colony, me friend, and hence ah subject of de Queen, God bless hah." Mr. Samuel was evidently a White Creole, a member of a class never very large, and steadily dwindling away: sometimes by way of absorbtion into the non-White majority, sometimes by way of emigration, and sometimes just by way of Death the Leveler. "I tehks de libahty of bringing you some of de forst fruits of de sile," said John S.

"Say, mighty thoughtful of you, Mr. Samuel, care for some rice and beans? — My name's Jack Limekiller."

"— to weet, sour*sop,* bread-*fruit,* oh-*ronge,* coco*nut* — what I care for, Mr. Limekiller, is some *rum. Rum* is what I has come to beg of you. De hond of mon, sah, has yet to perfect any medicine de superior of *rum."*

Jack groped in the cubbyhold. "What about all those bush medicines down at Cape Manatee? he asked, grunting. There was supposed to be a small bottle, a *chaparita,* as they called it. Where — Oh. It must be.... No. Then it must be....

Mr. Samuel rubbed the grey bristles on his strong jaw. "I does gront you, sah, de vertue of de country yerba. But you must steep de *yerba* een de *rum,* sah. Yes mon."

Jack's fingers finally found the bottle and his one glass and his one cup and poured. Mr. Samuel said

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nothing until he had downed his, and then gave a sigh of satisfaction. Jack, who had found a mawmee-apple in the basket of fruit, nodded as he peeled it. The flesh was tawny, and reminded him of winter-green.

After a moment, he decided that he didn't want to finish his rum, and, with a questioning look, passed it over to his guest. It was pleasant there on the open deck, the breeze faint but sufficient, and comparatively few flies of any sort had cared to make the voyage from shore. The boat swayed gently, there was no surf to speak of, the waves of the Atlantic having spent themselves, miles out, upon the reef; and only a few loose items of gear knocked softly as the vessel rose and fell upon the soft bosom of the inner bay.

"Well sah," said Mr. Samuel, with a slight smack of his lips, "I weesh to acknowledge your gener-osity. I ahsked you to wahk weet me wan mile, and you wahk weet me twain." Something splashed in the water, and he looked out, sharply.

"Shark?"

"No, mon. Too far een-shore." His eyes gazed out where there was nothing to be seen.

"Porpoise, maybe. Turtle. Or a sting-ray..."

After a moment, Samuel said, "Suppose to be ah tortle." He turned back and gave Limekiller a long, steady look.

Moved by some sudden devil, Limekiller said, "I hope, Mr. Samuel, that you are not about to tell me about some Indian caves or ruins, full of gold, back in the bush, which you are willing to go shares on with me and all I have to do is put up the money — because, you see, Mr. Samuel, I haven't got any money." And added, "Besides, they tell me it's illegal and that all those things belong to the Queen."

Solemnly, Samuel said, "God save de Queen." Then his eyes somehow seemed to become wider, and his mouth as well, and a sound like hissing steam escaped him, and he sat on the coaming and shook with almost-silent laugther. Then he said, "I sees dot you hahs been ahproached ahlready. No sah. No such teeng. My proposition een-clude only two quality: Expedition. Discretion." And he proceded to explain that what he meant was that Jack should, at regular inter-vals, bring him supplies in small quantities and that he would ad-vance the money for this and pay a small amount for the service. De-livery was to be made at night. And nothing was to be said about it, back at Port Cockatoo, or anywhere else.

Evidently Jack Limekiller wasn't the only one who had creditors.

"Anything else, Mr. Samuel?"

Samuel gave a deep sigh. "Ah,

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mon, I would like to sogjest dat you breeng me out ah woman... but best no. Best not.... not yet... Oh, mon, I om so lustful, ahlone out here, eef you tie ah rottlesnake down fah me I weel freeg eet!"

"Well, Mr. Samuel, the fact is, I will not tie a rattlesnake down for you, or up for you, for any purpose at all. However, I will keep my eyes open for a board with a knot-hole in it."

Samuel guffawed. Then he got up, his machete slap-flapping against his side, and, with a few more words, clambered down into his dory — no plank-boat, in these waters, but a dug-out — and began to paddle. Bayman, bushman, the machete was almost an article of clothing, though there was nothing to chop out here on the gentle waters of the bay. There was a splash, out there in the darkness, and a cry — Samuel's voice —

"Are you all right out there?" Limekiller called.

"Yes mon...." faintly. "Fine.... bloddy Oxville tortle...."

Limekiller fell easily asleep. Presently he dreamed of seeing a large Hawksbill turtle languidly pursuing John Samuel, who languidly evaded the pursuit. Later, he awoke, knowing that he knew what had awakened him, but for the moment unable to name it. The awakeners soon enough identified themselves. Manatees. Sea-cows. The most harmless creatures God ever made. He drowsed off again, but again and again he lightly awoke and always he could hear them sighing and sounding.

Early up, he dropped his line, made a small fire in the sheet-iron caboose set in its box of sand, and put on the pot of rice and beans to cook in coconut oil. The head and tail of the first fish went into a second pot, the top of the double boiler, to make fish-tea, as the chowder was called; when they were done, he gave them to Skippy. He fried the fillets with sliced breadfruit, which had as near no taste of its own as made no matter, but was a great extender of tastes. The second fish he cut and corned — that is, he spread coarse salt on it: there was nothing else to do to preserve it in this hot climate, without ice, and where the art of smoking fish was not known. And more than those two he did not bother to take, he had no license for commercial fishing, could not sell a catch in the market, and the "sport" of taking fish he could neither eat nor sell, and would have to throw back, was a pleasure which eluded his understanding.

It promised to be a hot day and it kept its promise, and he told himself, as he often did on hot, hot days, that it beat shoveling snow in Toronto.

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He observed a vacant mooring towards the south of town, recollected that it always had been vacant, and so, for no better reason than that, he tied up to it. Half of the remainder of his catch came ashore with him. This was too far south for any plank houses or tin roofs. Port Cockatoo at both ends straggled out into "trash houses," as they were called — sides of wild cane allowing the cooling breezes to pass, and largely keeping out the brute sun; roofs of thatch, usually of the bay or cohune palm. The people were poorer here than elsewhere in this town where no one at all by North American standards was rich, but 'trash' had no reference to that: *Loppings, twigs, and leaves of trees, bruised sugar cane, corn husks, etc.,* his dictionary explained.

An old, old woman in the ankle-length skirts and the kerchief of her generation stood in the doorway of her little house and looked, first at him, then at his catch. And kept on looking at it. All the coastal people of Hidalgo were fascinated by fish: rice and beans was the staple dish, but fish was the roast beef, the steak, the chicken, of this small, small country which had never been rich and was now — with the growing depletion of its mahogany and rosewood — even poorer than ever. Moved, not so much by conscious consideration of this as by a sudden impulse, he held up his hand and what it was holding. "Care for some corned fish, Grandy?"

Automatically, she reached out her tiny, dark hand, all twisted and withered, and took it. Her lips moved. She looked from the fish to him and from him to the fish; asked, doubtfully, "How much I have for you?" — meaning, how much did she owe him.

"Your prayers," he said, equally on impulse.

Her head flew up and she looked at him full in the face, then. "T'ank you, Buckra," she said. "And I weel do so. I weel pray for you." And she went back into her trash house.

Up the dusty, palm-lined path a ways, just before it branched into the cemetery road and the front street, he encountered Mr. Stuart — white-haired, learned, benevolent, deaf, and vague — and wearing what was surely the very last sola topee in everyday use in the Western Hemisphere (and perhaps, what with one thing and another, in the Eastern, as well).

"Did you hear the baboons last night?" asked Mr. Stuart.

Jack knew that "baboons," hereabouts, were howler-monkeys. Even their daytime noises, a hollow and repetitive *Rrrr-Rrrr-Rrrr,* sounded uncanny enough; as for their night-time wailings —

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"I was anchored offshore, down the coast, last night," he explained. "All I heard were the manatees."

Mr. Stuart looked at him with faint, grey eyes, smoothed his long moustache. "Ah, *those* poor chaps," he said. "They've slipped back down the scale... much *too* far down, I expect, for any quick return. Tried to help them, you know. Tried the Herodotus method. Carthaginians. Mute trade, you know. Set out some bright red cloth, put trade-goods on, went away. Returned. Things were knocked about, as though animals had been at them. *Some* of the items were gone, though. But nothing left in return. Too bad, oh yes, too bad..." His voice died away into a low moan, and he shook his ancient head. In another moment, before Jack could say anything, or even think of anything to say, Mr. Stuart had flashed him a smile of pure friendliness, and was gone. A bunch of flowers was in one hand, and the path he took was the cemetery road. He had gone to visit one of "the great company of the dead, which increase around us as we grow older."

From this mute offering, laid also upon the earth, nothing would be expected in return. There are those whom we do not see and whom we do not desire that they should ever show themselves at all.

***

The shop of Captain Cumberbatch was open. The rules as to what stores or offices were open and closed at which times were exactly the opposite of the laws of the Medes and the Persians. The time to go shopping was when one saw the shop open. Any shop. They opened, closed, opened, closed... And as to why stores with a staff of only one closed so often, why, they closed not only to allow the proprietor to siesta, they also closed to allow him to eat. It was no part of the national culture for Ma to send Pa's "tea" for Pa to eat behind the counter: Pa came home. Period. And as for establishments with a staff of more than one, why could the staff not have taken turns? Answer: De baas, of whatsoever race, creed, or color, might trust an employee with his life, but he would never trust his employee with his cash or stock, never, never, never.

Captain Cumberbatch had for many years puffed up and down the coast in his tiny packet-and-passenger boat, bringing cargo merchandise for the shopkeepers of Port Caroline, Port Cockatoo, and — very, very semi-occasionally — anywhere else as chartered. But some years ago he had swallowed the anchor and set up business as shopkeeper in Port Cockatoo. And one day an epiphany of sorts had occurred: Captain Cumberbatch had asked himself why he should

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bring cargo for others to sell and/or why he should pay others to bring cargo for he himself to sell. Why should he not bring his own cargo and sell it himself?

The scheme was brilliant as it was unprecedented. And indeed it had but one discernable flaw: Whilst Captain Cumberbatch was at sea, he could not tend shop to sell what he had shipped. And while he was tending his shop he could not put to sea to replenish stock. And, tossing ceasely from the one horn of this dilemma to the other, he often thought resentfully of the difficulties of competing with such peoples as the Chinas, Turks, and 'Paniards, who — most unfairly — were able to trust the members of their own families to mind the store.

Be all this as it may, the shop of Captain Cumberbatch was at this very moment open, and the captain himself was leaning upon his counter and smoking a pipe.

"Marneen, Jock. Hoew de day?"

"Bless God."

"Forever and ever, ehhh-men."

A certain amount of tinned corned-beef and corned-beef hash, of white sugar (it was nearer grey), of bread (it was dead white, as unsuitable an item of diet as could be designed for the country and the country would have rioted at the thought of being asked to eat dark), salt, lamp-oil, tea, tinned milk, cheese, were packed and passed across the worn counter; a certain amount of national currency made the same trip in reverse.

As for the prime purchaser of the items, Limekiller said nothing. That was part of the Discretion.

Outside again, he scanned the somnolent street for any signs that anyone might have — somehow — arrived in town who might want to charter a boat for... well, for anything. Short of smuggling, there was scarscely a purpose for which he would have not chartered the *Sacarissa.* It was not that he had an invincible repugnance to the midnight trade, there might well be places and times where he would have considered it. But Government, in British Hidalgo (here, as elsewhere in what was left of the Empire, the definite article was conspicuously absent: "Government will do this," they said — or, often as not, "Government will not do this") had not vexed him in any way and he saw no reason to vex it. And, furthermore, he had heard many reports of the accommodations at the Queen's Hotel, as the King Town "gaol" was called: and they were uniformly unfavorable.

But the front street was looking the same as ever, and, exemplifying, as ever, the observation of The Preacher, that there was no new thing under the sun. So, with only the smallest of sighs, he had started

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for the Cupid Club, when the clop-clop of hooves made him look up. Coming along the street was the horse-drawn equivalent of a pick-up truck. The back was open, and contained a few well-filled crocus sacks and some sawn timber; the front was roofed, but open at the sides; and for passengers it had a white-haired woman and a middle-aged man. It drew to a stop.

"Well, young man. And who are *you?*" the woman asked. Some elements of the soft local accent overlaid her speech, but underneath was something else, something equally soft, but different. Her "Man" was not *mon*, it was *mayun*, and her "you" was more like *yieww*.

He took off his hat. "Jack Limekiller is my name, ma'am."

"Put it right back on, Mr. Limekiller. I do appreciate the gesture, but it has already been gestured, now. Draft-dodger, are you?"

That was a common guess. Any North American who didn't fit into an old and familiar category — tourist, sport fisherman, sport huntsman, missionary, businessman — was assumed to be either a draft-dodger or a trafficker in "weed".... or maybe both. "No, ma'am. I've served my time, and, anyway, I'm a Canadian, and we don't have a draft."

"Well," she said, "doesn't matter even if you are, I don't *cay*-uh. Now, sir, I am Amelia Lebedee. And this is my nephew, Tom McFee." Tom smiled a faint and abstract smile, shook hands. He was sun-dark and had a slim moustache and he wore a felt hat which had perhaps been crisper than it was now. Jack had not seen many men like Tom McFee in Canada, but he had seen many men like Tom McFee in the United States. Tom McFee sold crab in Baltimore. Tom McFee managed the smaller cotton gin in a two-gin town in Alabama. Tom McFee was foreman at the shrimp-packing plant in one of the Florida Parishes in Louisiana. And Tom McFee was railroad freight agent in whatever dusty town in Texas it was that advertised itself as "Blue Vetch Seed Capital of the World."

"We are carrying you off to Shiloh for lunch," said Amelia, and a handosme old woman she was, and sat up straight at the reins. "So you just climb up in. Tom will carry you back later, when he goes for some more of this wood. Land! You'd think it was *teak*, they cut it so slow. Instead of pine."

Limekiller had no notion who or what or where Shiloh was, although it clearly could not be very far, and he could think of no reason why he should not go there. So in he climbed.

"Yes," said Amelia Lebedee,

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"the war wiped us out completely. So we came down here and we planted sugar, yes, we planted sugar and we made sugar for, oh, most eighty years. But we didn't move with the times, and so that's all over with now. We plant most anything *but* sugar nowadays. And when we see a new and a civilized face, we plant them down at the table." By this time the wagon was out of town. The bush to either side of the road looked like just bush-type bush to Jack. But to Mrs. Lebedee each acre had an identity of its own. "That was the Cullen's place," she'd say. And, "The Robinson's lived there. Beautiful horses, they had. Nobody has horses anymore, just us. Yonder used to be the Simmonses. Part of the house is still standing, but, land! — you cain't see it from the road anymore. They've gone back. Most everybody has gone back, who hasn't died off..." For a while she said nothing. The road gradually grew narrower, and all three of them began thoughtfully to slap at "flies."

A bridge now appeared and they rattled across it, a dark-green stream rushing below. There was a glimpse of an old grey house in the archaic, universal-tropical style, and then the bush closed in again. "And *they*-uh," Miss Amelia gestured, backwards, "is Texas. Oh, what a fine place that was, in its day! Nobody lives there, now. Old Captain Rutherford, the original settler, he was with Hood. *Gen*eral Hood, I mean."

It all flashed on Jack at once, and it all came clear, and he wondered that it had not been clear from the beginning. They were now passing through the site of the old Confederate colony. There had been such in Venezuela, in Colombia, even in Brazil; for all he knew, there might still be. But this one here in Hidalgo, it had not been wiped out in a year or two, like the Mormon colonies in Mexico — there had been no Revolution here, no gringo-hating Villistas — it had just ebbed away. Tiny little old B.H., "a country," as someone (who?) had said, "which you can put your arms around," had put its arms around the Rebel refugees... its thin, green arms... and it had let them clear the bush and build their houses.... and it had waited.... and waited.... and, as, one by one, the Southern American families had "died out" or "gone back," why, as easy as easy, the bush had slipped back. And, for the present, it seemed like it was going to stay back. It had, after all, closed in after the Old Empire Mayans had so mysteriously left, and that was a thousand years ago. What was a hundred years, to the bush?

The house at Shiloh was small and neat and trim and freshly painted, and one end of the veranda

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was undergoing repairs. There had been no nonsense, down here, of reproducing any of the ten thousand imitations of Mount Vernon. A neatly-mowed lawn surrounded the house; in a moment, as the wagon made its last circuit, Jack saw that the lawnmowers were a small herd of cattle. A line of cedars accompanied the road, and Miss Amelia pointed to a gap in the line. "That tree that was there," she said, calmly, "was the one that fell on my husband and on John Samuel. It had been obviously weakened in the hurricane, you know, and they went over to see how badly — that was a mistake. John Samuel lost his left eye and my husband lost his life."

Discretion... Would it be indiscreet to ask —? He asked.

"How long ago was this, Miss Amelia?" All respectable women down here were "Miss," followed by the first name, regardless of marital state.

"It was ten years ago, come September," she said. "Let's go in out of the sun, now, and Tom will take care of the horse."

In out of the sun was cool and neat and, though shady, the living room-dining room was as bright as fresh paint and flowered wall-paper — the only wall-paper he had seen in the colony — could make it. There were flowers in vases, too, fresh flowers, not the widely-popular plastic ones. Somehow the Bayfolk did not make much of flowers.

For lunch there was heart-of-palm, something not often had, for a palm had to die to provide it, and palms were not idly cut down: there was the vegetable pear, or chayote, here called cho-cho; venison chops, tomato with okra; there was cashew wine, made from the fruit of which the Northern Lands know only the seed, which they ignorantly call "nut." And, even, there was coffee, not powdered ick, not grown-in-Brazil - shipped - to - the - United - States - roasted - ground - canned - shipped - to - Hidalgo - coffee, but actual local coffee. Here, where coffee grew with no more care than weeds, hardly anyone except the Indians bothered to grow it, and what *they* grew, *they* used.

"Yes," Miss Amelia said, "it can be a very good life here. It is necessary to work, of course, but the work is well-rewarded, oh, not in terms of large sums of money, but in so many other ways. But it's coming to an end. There is just no way that working this good land can bring you all the riches you see in the moving pictures. And that is what they all want, and dream of, all the young people. And there is just no way they are going to get it."

Tom McFee made one of his rare comments. "*I* don't dream of any white Christmas," he said. "I am staying here, where it is always green. I told Malcolm Stuart that."

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Limekiller said, "I was just talking to him this morning, myself. But I couldn't understand what he was talking about... something about trying to trade with the manatees...."

The Shiloh people, clearly, had no trouble understanding what Stuart had been talking about; they did not even think it was particularly bizarre. "Ah, those poor folks down at Mantee," said Amelia Lebedee; "— now, mind you, I mean *Mantee,* Cape Mantee, I am *not* referring to the people up on Manatee River and the Lagoons, who are just as civilized as you and I: I mean *Cape* Mantee, which is its correct name, you know —"

"Where the medicine herbs grew?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Limekiller. Where they grew. As I suppose they still do. No one really knows, of course, *what* still grows down at Cape Mantee, though Nature, I suppose, would not change her ways. It was the hurricanes, you see. The War Year hurricanes. Until then, you know, Government had kept a road open, and once a month a police constable would ride down and, well, at least, take a look around. Not that any of the people there would ever bring any of their troubles to the police. They were... well, how should I put it? Tom, how would *you* put it?"

Tom thought a long moment. "Simple. They were always simple."

What he meant by "simple," it developed, was simple-minded. His aunt did not entirely agree with that. They gave that impression, the Mantee people, she said, but that was only because their ways were so different. "There is a story," she said, slowly, and, it seemed to Jack Limekiller, rather reluctantly, "that a British man-of-war took a Spanish slave-ship. I don't know when this would have been, it was well before we came down and settled here. Well before The War. Our own War, I mean. It was a small Spanish slaver and there weren't many captives in her. As I understand it, between the time that Britain abolished slavery and the dreadful Atlantic slave-trade finally disappeared, if slavers were taken anywhere near Africa, the British would bring the captives either to Saint Helena or Sierra Leone, and liberate them there. But this one was taken fairly near the American coast. I suppose she was heading for Cuba. So the British ship brought them *here.* To British Hidalgo. And the people were released down at Cape Mantee, and told they could settle there and no one would 'vex' them, as they say here."

Where the slaves had come from, originally, she did not know, but she thought the tradition was that they had come from somewhere

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well back in the African interior. Over the course of the many subsequent years, some had trickled into the more settled parts of the old colony. "But some of them just stayed down there," she said. "Keeping up their own ways."

"Too much intermarrying," Tom offered.

"So the Bayfolk say. The Bayfolk were always, *I* think, rather afraid of them. None of them would ever go there alone. And, after the hurricanes, when the road went out, and the police just couldn't get there, none of the Bayfolk would go there at *all*. By sea, I mean. You must remember, Mr. Limekiller, that in the 1940s this little colony was very much as it was in the 1840s. There were no airplanes. There wasn't one single highway. When I say there used to be a road to Mantee, you mustn't think it was a road such as we've got between Port Cockatoo and Shiloh."

Limekiller, thinking of the dirt road between Port Cockatoo and Shiloh, tried to think what the one between Port Cockatoo and the region behind Cape Mantee must have been like. Evidently a trail, nothing more, down which an occasional man on a mule might make his way, boiling the potato-like fruit of the breadnut tree for his food and feeding his mule the leaves: a trail that had to be "chopped," had to be "cleaned" by machete-work, at least twice a year, to keep the all-consuming bush from closing over it the way the flesh closes over a cut. An occasional trader, an occasional buyer or gatherer of chicle or herbs or hides, an occasional missioner or medical officer, at infrequent intervals would pass along this corridor in the eternal jungle.

And then came a hurricane, smashing flat everything in its path. And the trail vanished. And the trail was never re-cut. British Hidalgo had probably never been high on any list of colonial priorities at the best of times. During the War of 1939-1945, they may have forgotten all about it in London. Many of Hidalgo's able-bodied men were off on distant fronts. An equal number had gone off to cut the remaining forests of the Isle of Britain, to supply anyway a fraction of the wood which was then impossible to import. Nothing could be spared for Mantee and its people; in King Town, Mantee was deemed as distant as King Town was in London. The p.c. never went there again. No missioner ever returned. Neither had a medical officer or nurse. Nor any trader. No one. Except for Malcolm Stuart...

"He did try. Of course, he had his own concerns. During the War he had his war work. Afterwards, he took up a block of land a few miles back from here, and he had his hands full with that. And then,

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after, oh, I don't remember how many years of stories, stories, — there is no television here, you know, and few people have time for books — stories about the Mantee people, well, he decided he had to go have a look, see for himself, you know."

Were the Mantee people really eating raw meat and raw fish? He would bring them matches. Had they actually reverted to the use of stone for tools? He would bring them machetes, axes, knives. And... as for the rest of it.... the rest of the rather awful and certainly very odd stories.... he would see for himself.

But he had seen nothing. There had been nothing to see. That is, nothing which he could be sure he had seen. Perhaps he had thought that he had seen some few things which he had not cared to mention to Jack, but had spoken of to the Shiloh people.

They, however, were not about to speak of it to Jack.

"Adventure," said Amelia Lebedee, dismissing the matter of Mantee with a sigh. "Nobody wants the adventure of cutting bush to plant yams. They want the adventure of night clubs and large automobiles. They see it in the moving pictures. And you, Mr. Limekiller, what is it that *you* want? — coming, having come, from the land of night clubs and large automobiles..."

The truth was simple. "I wanted the adventure of sailing a boat with white sails through tropic seas," he said. "I saw it in the moving pictures. I never had a night club but I had a large automobile, and I sold it and came down here and bought the boat. And, well, here I am."

They had talked right through the siesta time. Tom McFee was ready, now, to return for the few more planks which the sawmill might — or might not — have managed to produce since the morning. It was time to stand up now and to make thanks and say goodbye. "Yes," said Amelia Lebedee, pensively. "Here we are. Here we all are. We are all here. And some of us are more content being here than others."

Half-past three at the Cupid Club. On Limekiller's table, the usual single bottle of beer. Also, the three chaparitas of rum which he had bought — but they were in a paper bag, lest the sight of them, plus the fact that he could invite no one to drink of them, give rise to talk that he was "mean." Behind the bar, Alfonso Key. In the dark, dark back, slowly sipping a lemonade (all soft drinks were "lemonade" — coke was lemonade, strawberry pop was lemonade, ginger stout was lemonade.... sometimes, though not often, for reasons inexplicable, there was also lemon-fla-

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vored lemonade) — in the dark rear part of the room, resting his perpetually sore eyes, was old Captain Cudgel.

"Well, how you spend the night, Jock?" Alfonso ready for a tale of amour, ready with a quip, a joke.

"Oh, just quietly. Except for the manatees." Limekiller, saying this, had a sudden feeling that he had said all this before, been all this before, was caught on the moebius strip which life in picturesque Port Cockatoo had already become, caught, caught, never would be released. *Adventure!* Hah!.

At this point, however, a slightly different note, a slightly different comment from the old, old man.

"Een Eedalgo," he said, dolefully, "de monatee hahv no leg, mon. Becahs Eedalgo ees a smahl coun-*tree,* ahn every-teeng smahl. Every-teeng *weak*. Now, een Ahfrica, mon, de monatee *does* hahv leg."

Key said, incredulous, but still respectful, "What you tell we, Captain Cudgel? *What?*" His last word, pronounced in the local manner of using it as a particular indication of skepticism, of criticism, of denial, seemed to have at least three *T*s at the end of it; he repeated: "Wha*ttt?*"

"Yes, mon. Yes sah. Een Ahfrica, de monatee hahv *leg,* mon. Eet be ah poerful beast, een Ahfrica, come up on de *lond,* mon."

"I tell you. *Me* di hear eet befoah. Een Ahfrica," he repeated, doggedly, "de monatee hahv leg, de monatee be ah poerful beast, come up on de *lond,* mon, no lahf, mon —"

"Me no di lahf, sah —"

"— de w'ol' people, dey tell me so, fah true."

Alfonso Key gave his head a single shake, gave a single click of his tongue; gave Jack a single look.

Far down the street, the bell of the Church of Saint Benedict the Moor sounded. Whatever time it was marking had nothing to do with Greenwich Meridian Time or any variation thereof.

The weak, feeble old voice resumed the thread of conversation. "Me grahndy di tell me dot she grahndy di tell *she.* Motta hav foct, eet me grahndy di give me me name, b'y. Cudgel. Ahfrica name. Fah true. Fah true."

A slight sound of surprise broke Limekiller's silence. He said, "Excuse me, Captain. Could it have been 'Cudjoe'.... maybe?"

For a while he thought that the question had either not been heard or had, perhaps, been resented. Then the old man said, "Eet could be so. Sah, eet might be so. Lahng, lahng time ah-*go*.... Me Christian name, Pe-tah. Me w'ol' grahndy she say, 'Pickney: you hahv ah Christian name, Pe-tah. But me give you Ahfrica name, too. Cahdjo.

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No fah-get, pickney? Time poss, time poss, de people dey ahl cahl me 'Cudgel,' you see, sah. So me fah-get ... Sah, hoew you know dees teeng, sah?"

Limekiller said that he thought he had read it in a book. The old captain repeated the word, lengthening it in his local speech. "Ah boook, sah. To t'eenk ahv dot. Een ah boook. Me w'own name een ah boook." By and by he departed as silently as always.

In the dusk a white cloth waved behind the thin line of white beach. He took off his shirt and waved back. Then he transferred the groceries into the skiff and, as soon as it was dark and he had lit and securely fixed his lamp, set about rowing ashore. By and by a voice called out, "Mon, where de Hell you gweyn? You keep on to de right, you gweyn wine up een *Sponeesh* Hidalgo: Mah to de lef, mon: mah to de *lef?*" And with such assistances, soon enough the skiff softly scraped the beach.

Mr. John Samuel's greeting was, "You bring de rum?" The rum put in his hand, he took up one of the sacks, gestured Limekiller towards the other. "Les go timely, noew," he said. For a moment, in what was left of the dimmest dimlight, Jack thought the man was going to walk straight into an enormous tree: instead, he walked across the enormous roots and behind the tree. Limekiller followed the faint white patch of shirt bobbing in front of him. Sometimes the ground was firm, sometimes it went squilchy, sometimes it was simply running water — shallow, fortunately — sometimes it felt like gravel. The bush noises were still fairly soft. A rustle. He hoped it was only a wish-willy lizard, or a bamboo-chicken — an iguana — and not a yellow-jaw, that snake of which it was said.... but this was no time to remember scare stories about snakes.

Without warning — although what sort of warning there could have been was a stupid question, anyway — there they were. Gertrude Stein, returning to her old home town after an absence of almost forty years, and finding the old home itself demolished, had observed (with a lot more objectivity than she was usually credited with) that there was no *there,* there. The *there,* here, was simply a clearing, with a very small fire, and a *ramada:* four poles holding up a low thatched roof. John Samuel let his sack drop. "Ahnd noew," he said, portentously, "let us broach de rum."

After the chaparita had been not only broached but drained, for the second time that day Limekiller dined ashore. The cooking was done on a raised fire-hearth of clay-

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and-sticks, and what was cooked was a breadfruit, simply strewn, when done, with sugar; and a gibnut. To say that the gibnut, or paca, is a rodent, is perhaps — though accurate — unfair: it is larger than a rabbit, and it eats well. After that Samuel made black tea and laced it with more rum. After that he gave a vast belch and a vast sigh. "Can you play de bon-*joe?*" he next asked.

"Well.... I have been known to try...."

The lamp flared and smoked. Samuel adjusted it... somewhat... He got up and took a bulky object down from a peg on one of the roof-poles. It was a sheet of thick plastic, laced with raw-hide thongs, which he laboriously unknotted. Inside that was a deerskin. And inside *that*, an ordinary banjo-case, which contained an ordinary, if rather old and worn, banjo.

"Mehk I hear ah sahng.... ah sahng ahv *you* country."

What song should he make him hear? No particularly Canadian song brought itself to mind. Ah well, he would dip down below the border just a bit.... His fingers strummed idly on the strings. The words grew, the tune grew, he lifted up what some (if not very many) had considered a not-bad-baritone, and began to sing and play.

Manatee gal, ain't you coming out tonight,
Coming out tonight, coming out tonight?
Oh, Manatee gal, ain't you coming out tonight,
To dance by the light of the —

An enormous hand suddenly covered his own and pressed it down. The tune subsided into a jumble of chords, and an echo, and a silence.

"Mon, mon, you not do me right. I no di say, "Mehk I hear a sahng ahv *you* country?" Samuel, on his knees, breathed heavily. His breath was heavy with rum and his voice was heavy with reproof... and with a something else for which Limekiller had no immediate name. But, friendly it was not.

Puzzled more than apologetic, Jack said, "Well, it *is* a North American song, anyway. It was an old Erie Canal song. It — Oh. I'll be damned. Only it's supposed to go, *'Buffalo gal, ain't you coming out tonight,'* And I dunno what made me change it, what difference does it make?"

"What different? What different it mehk? Ah, Christ me King! You lee' buckra b'y, you not know w'ehnnah-teeng?"

It was all too much for Limekiller. The last thing he wanted was anything resembling an argument, here in the deep, dark bush, with an all-but-stranger. Samuel having lifted his heavy hand from the instrument, Limekiller, moved by a

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sudden spirit, began,

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,

To save a wretch like me.

With a rough catch of his breath, Samuel muttered, "Yes. Yes. Dot ees good. Go on, b'y. No stop."

I once was halt, but now can walk:

Was blind, but now I see...

He sang the beautiful old hymn to the end: and, by that time, if not overpowered by Grace, John Samuel — having evidently broached the second and the third chaparita — was certainly overpowered: and it did not look as though the dinner-guest was going to get any kind of guided tour back to the shore and the skiff. He sighed and he looked around him. A bed rack had roughly been fixed up, and its lashings were covered with a few deer hides and an old Indian blanket. Samuel not responding to any shakings or urgings, Limekiller, with a shrug and a "Well what the Hell," covered him with the blanket as he lay upon the ground. Then, having rolled up the sacks the supplies had come in and propped them under his head, Limekiller disposed himself for slumber on the hides. Some lines were running through his head and he paused a moment to consider what they were. What they were, they were, *From ghoulies and ghosties, long-leggedy feasties, and bugges that go* boomp *in the night, Good Lord, deliver us.* With an almost absolute certainty that this was not the Authorized Version or Text, he heard himself give a grottle and a snore and knew he was fallen asleep.

He awoke to slap heartily at some flies, and the sound perhaps awoke the host, who was heard to mutter and mumble. Limekiller leaned over. "What did you say?"

The lines said, Limekiller learned that he had heard them before.

"Eef you tie ah rottlesnake doewn fah me, I weel freeg eet."

"I yield," said Limekiller, "to any man so much hornier than myself. Produce the snake, sir, and I will consider the rest of the matter."

The red eye of the expiring fire winked at him. It was still winking at him when he awoke from a horrid nightmare of screams and thrashings-about, in the course of which he had evidently fallen or had thrown himself from the bed-rack to the far side. Furthermore, he must have knocked against one of the roof-poles in doing so, because a good deal of the thatch had landed on top of him. He threw it off, and, getting up, began to apologize.

"Sorry if I woke you, Mr. Samuel. I don't know what —" There was no answer, and looking

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around in the faint light of the fire, he saw no one.

"Mr. Samuel? Mr. *Samuel?* John? Oh, hey, *Johhhn...!?*"

No answer. If the man had merely gone out to "ease himself," as the Bayfolk delicately put it, he would have surely been near enough to answer. No one in the colony engaged in strolling in the bush at night for fun. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. He felt for and found his matches, struck one, found the lamp, lit it, looked around.

There was still no sign of John Samuel, but what there were signs of was some sort of horrid violence. Hastily he ran his hands over himself, but, despite his fall, despite part of the roof having fallen on him, he found no trace of blood.

All the blood which lay around, then, must have been — could only have been — John Samuel's blood.

And the screaming and the sounds of something — or some things — heavily thrashing around, they had not been in any dream. They had been the sounds of truth.

And as for what else he saw, as he walked, delicate as Agag, around the perimeter of the clearing, he preferred not to speculate.

There was a shotgun and there were shells. He put the shells into the chambers and he stood up, weapon in his hand, all the rest of the night.

***

"Now, if it took you perhaps less than an hour to reach the shore, and if you left immediately, how is it that you were so long in arriving at Port?" the District Commissioner asked. He asked politely, but he did ask. He asked a great many questions, for, in addition to his other duties, he was the Examining Magistrate.

"Didn't you observe the wind, D.C.? Ask anyone who was out on the water yesterday. I spent most of the day tacking —"

Corporal Huggin said, softly, from the wheel, "That would be correct, Mr. Blossom."

They were in the police boat, the *George*... once, Jack had said to P.C. Ed Huggin, "For George VI, I suppose?" and Ed, toiling over the balky and antique engine, his clear tan skin smudged with grease, had scowled, and said, "More for bloody George III, you ask *me*...." At earliest daylight, yesterday, Lime-killer, red-eyed and twitching, had briefly cast around in the bush near the camp, decided that, ignorant of bush-lore as he was, having not even a compass, let alone a pair of boots or a snake-bite kit, it would have been insane to attempt any explorations. He found his way along the path, found his skiff still tied up, and had rowed to his boat. Unfavorable winds had destroyed his hope of being of getting back to Port Cockatoo in minimum time: it

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had been night when he arrived.

The police had listened to his story, had summoned Mr. Florian Blossom, the District Commissioner; all had agreed that "No purpose would be served by attempting anything until next morning." They had taken his story down, word by word, and by hand — if there was an official stenographer anywhere in the country, Limekiller had yet to hear of it — and by longhand, too; and in their own accustomed style and method, too, so that he was officially recorded as having said things such as: *Awakened by loud sounds of distress, I arose and hailed the man known to me as John Samuel. Upon receiving no response,* etcetera.

After Jack had signed the statement, and stood up, thinking to return to his boat, the District Commissioner said, "I believe that they can accommodate you with a bed in the Unmarried Police Constables' Quarters, Mr. Limekiller. Just for the night."

He looked at the official. A slight shiver ran up and down him. "Do you mean that I am a prisoner?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Limekiller. No such thing."

"You know, if I had wanted to, I could have been in Republican waters by now."

Mr. Blossom's politeness never flagged. "We realize it and we take it into consideration, Mr. Limekiller. But if we are all of us here together it will make an early start in the morning more efficacious."

Anyway, Jack was able to shower, and Ed Huggins loaned him clean clothes. Of course they had not gotten an early start in the morning. Only fishermen and sandboatmen got early starts. Her Majesty's Government moved at its accustomed pace. In the police launch, besides Limekiller, was P.C. Huggin, D.C. Blossom, a very small and very black and very wiry man called Harlow the Hunter, Police-Sergeant Ruiz, and white-haired Dr. Rafael, the District Medical Officer.

"I wouldn't have been able to come at all, you know," he said to Limekiller, "except my assistant has returned from his holidays a day earlier. Oh, there is so much to see in this colony! Fascinating, fascinating!"

D.C. Blossom smiled. "Doctor Rafael is a famous antiquarian, you know, Mr. Limekiller. It was he who discovered the grave-*stone* of my three or four times great-grandsir and -grandy."

Sounds of surprise and interest — polite on Limekiller's part, gravestones perhaps not being what he would have most wished to think of — genuine on the part of everyone else, ancestral stones not being numerous in British Hidalgo.

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"Yes, yes," Dr. Rafael agreed. "Two years ago I was on *my* holidays, and I went out to St. Saviour's Caye... well, to what is left of St. Saviour's Caye after the last few hurricanes. You can imagine what is left of the old settlement. Oh, the Caye is dead, it is like a skeleton, bleached and bare!" Limekiller felt he could slightly gladly have tipped the medico over the side and watched the bubbles; but, unaware, on the man went. "— so, difficult though it was making my old map agree with the present outlines, still, I did find the site of the old burial-ground, and I cast about and I prodded with my iron rod, and I felt stone underneath the sand, and I dug!"

More sounds of excited interest. Digging in the sand on the bit of ravished sand and coral where the ancient settlement had been — but was no more — was certainly of more interest than digging for yams on the fertile soil of the mainland. And, even though they already knew that it was not a chest of gold, still, they listened and they murmured *oh* and *ah*. "The letters were still very clear, I had no difficulty reading them. *Sacred to the memory of Ferdinando Rousseau, a native of Guernsey, and of Marianna his Wife, a native of Mandingo, in Africa.* Plus a poem in three stanzas, of which I have deposited a copy in the National Archives, and of course I have a copy myself and a third copy I offered to old Mr. Ferdinand Rousseau in King Town —"

Smiling, Mr. Blossom asked, "And what he tell you, then, Doctor?"

Dr. Rafael's smile was a trifle rueful. "He said, 'Let the dead bury their dead' —" The others all laughed. Mr. Ferdinand Rousseau was evidently known to all of them. "— and he declined to take it. Well, I was aware that Mr. Blossom's mother was a cousin of Mr. Rousseau's mother —" ("Double-cousin," said Mr. Blossom.)

Said Mr. Blossom, "And the doctor has even been there, too, to that country. I don't mean Guernsey; in Africa, I mean; not true, Doctor?"

Up ahead, where the coast thrust itself out into the blue, blue Bay, Jack thought he saw the three isolated palms which were his landmark. But there was no hurry. He found himself unwilling to hurry anything at all.

Doctor Rafael, in whose voice only the slightest trace of alien accent still lingered, said that after leaving Vienna, he had gone to London, in London he had been offered and had accepted work in a British West African colonial medical service. "I was just a bit surprised that the old grave-stone referred to Mandingo as a country,

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there is no such country on the maps today, but there are such a people."

"What they like, Doc-tah? What they like, thees people who dey mehk some ahv Mr. Blossom ahn-*ces*-tah?"

There was another chuckle. This one had slight overtones.

The DMO's round, pink face furrowed in concentration among memories a quarter of a century old. "Why," he said, "they are like elephants. They never forget."

There was a burst of laughter. Mr. Blossom laughed loudest of them all. Twenty-five years earlier he would have asked about Guernsey; today....

Harlow the Hunter, his question answered, gestured towards the shore. A slight swell had come up, the blue was flecked, with bits of white. "W'over dere, suppose to be wan ahv w'ol' Bob Blaine cahmp, in de w'ol' days."

"Filthy fellow," Dr. Rafael said, suddenly, concisely.

"Yes sah," Harlow agreed. "He was ah lewd fellow, fah true, fah true. What he use to say, he use to say, 'Eef you tie ah rottle-snehk doewn fah me, I weel freeg eet....'"

Mr. Blossom leaned forward. "Something the matter, Mr. Limekiller?"

Mr. Limekiller did not at that moment feel like talking. Instead, he lifted his hand and pointed towards the headland with the three isolated palms.

"Cape Man'tee, Mr. Limekiller? What about it?"

Jack cleared his throat. "I thought that was farther down the coast... according to my chart..."

Ed Huggin snorted. "Chart! Washington chart copies London chart and London chart I think must copy the original chart made by old Captain Cook. *Chart!*" He snorted again.

Mr. Florian Blossom asked, softly, "Do you recognize your landfall, Mr. Limekiller? I suppose it would not be at the cape itself, which is pure mangrove bog and does not fit the description which you gave us...."

Mr. Limekiller's eyes hugged the coast. Suppose he couldn't *find* the goddamned place? Police and Government wouldn't like that at all. Every ounce of fuel had to be accounted for. Chasing the wild goose was not approved. He might find an extension of his stay refused when next he went applying for it. He might even find himself officially listed as a Proscribed Person, trans.: haul-ass, Jack, and don't try coming back. And he realized that he did not want that at all, at all. The whole coast looked the same to him, all of a sudden. And then, all of a sudden, it didn't.... somehow. There was something about that solid-seeming mass of bush —

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"I think there may be a creek. Right there."

Harlow nodded. "Yes mon. Is a creek. Right dere."

And right there, at the mouth of the creek — in this instance, meaning, not a stream, but an inlet — Limekiller recognized the huge tree. And Harlow the Hunter recognized something else. "Dot mark suppose to be where Mr. Limekiller drah up the skiff."

"Best we ahl put boots *on*," said Sergeant Ruiz, who had said not a word until now. They all put boots on. Harlow shouldered an axe. Ruiz and Huggin took up machetes. Dr. Rafael had, besides his medical bag, a bundle of what appeared to be plastic sheets and crocus sacks. "You doesn't mind to cahry ah shovel, Mr. Jock?" Jack decided that he could think of a number of things he had rather carry: but he took the thing. And Mr. Blossom carefully picked up an enormous camera, with tripod. The Governments of His and/or Her Majesties had never been known for throwing money around in these parts; the camera could hardly have dated back to George III but was certainly earlier than the latter part of the reign of George V.

"You must lead us, Mr. Limekiller." The District Commissioner was not grim. He was not smiling. He was grave.

Limekiller nodded. Climbed over the sprawling trunk of the tree. Suddenly remembered that it had been night when he had first come this way, that it had been from the other direction that he had made his way the next morning, hesitated. And then Harlow the Hunter spoke up.

"Eef you pleases, Mistah Blossom. I believes I knows dees pahth bet-tah."

And, at any rate, he knew it well enough to lead them there in less time, surely, than Jack Limekiller could have.

Blood was no longer fresh and red, but a hundred swarms of flies suddenly rose to show where the blood had been. Doctor Rafael snipped leaves, scooped up soil, deposited his take in containers.

And in regard to other evidence, whatever it was evidence of, for one thing, Mr. Blossom handed the camera over to Police-Corporal Huggin, who set up his measuring tape, first along one deep depression and photographed it; then along another...another...another...

"Mountain-cow," said the District Commissioner. He did not sound utterly persuaded.

Harlow shook his head. "No, Mistah Florian. No sah. No, no."

"Well, if not a tapir: what?"

Harlow shrugged.

Something heavy had been dragged through the bush. And it had been dragged by something

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heavier... something much, much heavier... It was horridly hot in the bush, and every kind of "fly" seemed to be ready and waiting for them: sand-fly, bottle fly, doctor-fly. They made unavoidable noise, but whenever they stopped, the silence closed in on them. No wild parrot shrieked. No "baboons" rottled or growled. No warree grunted or squealed. Just the waiting silence of the bush. Not friendly. Not hostile. Just indifferent.

And when they came to the little river (afterwards, Jack could not even find it on the maps) and scanned the opposite bank and saw nothing, the District Commissioner said, "Well, Harlow. What you think?"

The wiry little man looked up and around. After a moment he nodded, plunged into the bush. A faint sound, as of someone — or of something? — Then Ed Huggin pointed. Limekiller would never even have noticed that particular tree was there; indeed, he was able to pick it out now only because a small figure was slowly but surely climbing it. The tree was tall, and it leaned at an angle — old enough to have experienced the brute force of a hurricane, strong enough to have survived, though bent.

Harlow called something Jack did not understand, but he followed the others, splashing down the shallows of the river. The river slowly became a swamp. Harlow was suddenly next to them. "Eet not fah," he muttered.

Nor was it.

What there was of it.

An eye in the monstrously swollen head winked at them. Then an insect leisurely crawled out, flapped its horridly-damp wings in the hot and humid air, and sluggishly flew off. There was no wink. There was no eye.

"Mr. Limekiller," said District Commissioner Blossom, "I will now ask you if you identify this body as that of the man known to you as John Samuel."

"It's him. Yes sir."

But was as though the commissioner had been holding his breath and had now released it. "Well, well," he said. "And he was supposed to have gone to Jamaica and died there. I never heard he'd come back. Well, he is dead now, for true."

But little Doctor Rafael shook his snowy head. "He is certainly dead. And he is certainly not John Samuel."

"Why —" Limekiller swallowed bile, pointed. "Look. The eye is missing. John Samuel lost that eye when the tree fell —"

"Ah, yes, young man. John Samuel did. *But not that eye.*"

The bush was not so silent now. Every time the masses and masses of flies were waved away, they rose,

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buzzing, into the heavy, squalid air. Buzzing, hovered. Buzzing, returned.

"Then who in thee Hell —?"

Harlow wiped his face on his sleeve. "Well, sah. I cahn tell you. Lord hahv mercy on heem. Eet ees Bob Blaine."

There was a long outdrawn *ahhh* from the others. Then Ed Huggin said, "But Bob Blaine had both his eyes."

Harlow stopped, picked a stone from the river bed, with dripping hand threw it into the bush.... one would have said, at random. With an ugly croak, a buzzard burst up and away. Then Harlow said something, as true — and as dreadful — as it was unarguable. "He not hahv either of them, noew."

By what misadventure and in what place Bob Blaine had lost one eye whilst alive and after decamping from his native land, no one knew: and perhaps it did not matter. He had trusted on "discretion" not to reveal his hideout, there at the site of his old bush-camp. But he had not trusted to it one hundred percent. Suppose that Limekiller were deceitfully or accidently, to let drop the fact that a man was camping out there. A man with only one eye. What was the man's name? John Samuel. What? John *Samuel*.... Ah. Then John Samuel had not, after all, died in Jamaica, according to report. Report had been known to be wrong before. John Samuel alive, then. No big thing. Nobody then would have been moved to go down there to check up. — Nobody, now, knew why Bob Blaine had returned. Perhaps he had made things too hot for himself, down in "republican waters" — where hot water could be so very much hotter than back here. Perhaps some day a report would drift back up, and it might be a true report or it might be false or it might be a mixture of both.

As for the report, the official, Government one, on the circumstances surrounding the death or Roberto Blaine, a.k.a. Bob Blaine... as for Limekiller's statement and the statements of the District Commissioner and the District Medical Officer and the autopsy and the photographs: why, that had all been neatly transcribed and neatly (and literally) laced with red tape, and forwarded up the coast to King Town. And as to what happened to it there —

"What do you think they will do about it, Doctor?"

Rafael's rooms were larger, perhaps, than a bachellor needed. But they were the official quarters for the DMO, and so the DMO lived in them. The wide floors gleamed with polish. The spotless walls showed, here a shield, there a paddle, a har-

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poon with barbed head, the carapace of a huge turtle, a few paintings. The symmetry and conventionality of it all was slightly marred by the bookcases which were everywhere, against every wall, adjacent to desk and chairs. And all were full, crammed, overflowing.

Doctor Rafael shrugged. "Perhaps the woodlice will eat the papers," he said. "Or the roaches, or the wee-wee- ants. The mildew. The damp. Hurricane... This is not a climate which helps preserve the history of men. I work hard to keep my own books and papers from going that way. But I am not Government, and Government lacks time and money and personnel, and... perhaps, also.... Government has so many, many things pressing upon it.... Perhaps, too, Government lacks interest."

"What were those tracks, Doctor Rafael?"

Doctor Rafael shrugged.

"You do know, don't you?"

Doctor Rafael grimaced.

"Have you seen them, or anything like them, before?"

Doctor Rafael, very slowly, very slowly, nodded.

"Well... for God's sake... can you even give me a, well, a *hint?* I mean: that was a rather rotten experience for me, you know. And —"

The sunlight, kept at bay outside, broke in through a crack in the jalousies, sun making the scant white hair for an instant ablaze: like the brow of Moses. Doctor Rafael got up and busied himself with the fresh lime and the sweetened lime juice and the gin and ice. He was rapt in this task, like an ancient apothecary mingling strange unguents and syrups. Then he gave one of the gimlets to his guest and from one he took a long, long pull.

"You see. I have two years to go before my retirement. The pension, well, it is not spectacular, but I have no complaint. I will be able to rest. Not for an hour, or an evening... an evening! only on my holidays, once a year, do I even have an evening all my own! — Well. You may imagine how I look forward. And I am not going to risk premature and enforced retirement by presenting Government with an impossible situation. One which wouldn't be its fault, anyway. By insisting on impossible things. By demonstrating —"

He finished his drink. He gave Jack a long, shrewd look.

"So I have nothing more to say... about *that.* If they want to believe, up in King Town, that the abominable Bob Blaine was mauled by a crocodile, let them. If they prefer to make it a jaguar or even a tapir, why, that is fine with Robert Rafael, M.D., DMO. It might be, probably, the first time in history

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that anybody anywhere was killed by a tapir, but that is not my affair. The matter is, so far as I am concerned, so far — in fact — as *you* and I are concerned — over.

"Do you understand?"

Limekiller nodded. At once the older man's manner changed. "I have many, many books, as you can see. Maybe some of them would be of interest to you. Pick any one you like. Pick one at random." So saying, he took a book from his desk and put it in Jack's hands. It was just a book-looking book. It was, in fact, volume ii of the Everyman edition of Plutarch's Lives. There was a wide card, of the kind on which medical notes or records are sometimes made, and so Jack Limekiller opened the book at that place.

seasons, as the gods sent them, seemed natural to him. The Greeks that inhabited Asia were very much pleased to see the great lords and governors of Persia, with all the pride, cruelty, and

"Well, now, what the Hell," he muttered. The card slipped, he clutched. He glanced at it. He put down vol. ii of the Lives and he sat back and read the notes on the card.

> It is in the nature of things [they began] for men, in a new country and faced with new things, to name them after old, familiar things. Even when resemblance unlikely. Example: *Mountain-cow* for tapir. ('Tapir' from Tupi Indian *tapira,* big beast.) Example: Mawmee-*apple* not apple at all. Ex.: *Sea-cow* for manatee. Early British settlers not entomologists. Quest.: Whence word *manatee?* From Carib? Perhaps. After the British, what other people came to this corner of the world? Ans.: Black people. Calabars, Ashantee, Mantee, Mandingo. Re last two names. Related peoples. Named after totemic animal. *Also,* not likely? *likely* — named unfamiliar animals after familiar (i.e. familiar in Africa) animals. Mantee, Mandee-hippo. Refer legend

Limekiller's mouth fell open. "Oh, my God!" he groaned. In his ear now, he heard the old, old, quavering voice of Captain Cudgel (once Cudjoe): *"Mon, een Ahfrica, de mon-ah-tee hahv leg, I tell you. Een Ahfrica eet be ah poerful beast, come up on de lond, I tell you.... de w'ol' people, dey tell me so, fah true...."*

He heard the old voice, repeating the old words, no longer even half-understood: but, in some measure, at least half-true.

> Refer legend of were-animals, universal. Were-wolf,

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were-tiger, were-shark, were-dolphin. Quest.: Were-manatee?

"Mon-ah-tee ees hahlf ah mon ....hahv teats like a womahn... Dere ees wahn mon, mehk mellow weet mon-ah-tee, hahv pickney by mon-ah-tee..."

And he heard another voice saying, not only once, saying, *"Mon, eef you tie ah rottlesnake doewn fah me, I weel freeg eet...."*

He thought of the wretched captives in the Spanish slaveship, set free to fend for themselves in a bush by far wilder than the one left behind. Few, to begin with, fewer as time went on; marrying and intermarrying, no new blood, no new thoughts. And, finally, the one road in to them, destroyed. Left alone. Left quite alone. Or... almost...

He shuddered.

How desperate for refuge must Blaine have been, to have sought to hide himself anywhere near Cape Mantee —

And what miserable happenstance had brought he himself, Jack Limekiller, to improvise on that old song that dreadful night? — And what had he called up out of the darkness.... out of the bush.... out of the mindless present which was the past and future and the timeless tropical forever....?

There was something pressing gently against his finger, something on the other side of the card. He turned it over. A clipping from a magazine had been roughly pasted there.

> Valentry has pointed out that, despite a seeming resemblance to such aquatic mammals as seals and walrus, the manatee is actually more closely related anatomically to the elephant.

...out of the bush... out of the darkness.... out of the mindless present which was also the past and the timeless tropical forever...

"They are like elephants. They never forget."

"Ukh," he said, through clenched teeth. "My God. Uff. Jesus...."

The card was suddenly, swiftly, snatched from his hands. He looked up, still in a state of shock, to see Doctor Rafael tearing it into pieces.

"Doña 'Sana!"

A moment. Then the housekeeper, old, all in white. "Doctor?"

"Burn this."

A moment passed. Just the two of them again. Then Rafael, in a tone which was nothing but kindly, said, "Jack, you are still young and you are still healthy. My advice to you: Go away. Go to a cooler climate. One with cooler ways and cooler memories." The old woman called something from the back of the house. The old man sighed. "It is the summons to supper," he said. "Not only must I eat in haste be-

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cause I have my clinic in less than half-an-hour, but suddenly-invited guests make Dona 'Saña very nervous. Good night, then, Jack."

Jack had had two gin drinks. He felt that he needed two more. At least two more. Or, if not gin, rum. Beer would not do. He wanted to pull the blanket of booze over him, awfully, awfully quickly. He had this in his mind as though it were a vow as he walked up the front street towards the Cupid Club.

Someone hailed him, someone out of the gathering dusk.

"Jock! Hey, mon, Jock! Hey, b'y! Where you gweyn so fahst? Bide, b'y, bide a bit!"

The voice was familiar. It was that of Harry Hazeed, his principal creditor in King Town. Ah, well. He had had his chance, Limekiller had. He could have gone on down the coast, down into the republican waters, where the Queen's writ runneth not. Now it was too late.

"Oh, hello, Harry," he said, dully.

Hazeed took him by the hand. Took him by both hands. "Mon, show me where is your boat? She serviceable? She is? Good: Mon, you don't hear de news: Welcome's warehouse take fire and born up! Yes, mon. Ahl de carn in King *Town* born up! No carn ah-tahl: No tortilla, no empinada, no tamale, no carn-*cake!* Oh, mon, how de people going to punish! Soon as I hear de news, I drah me money from de bonk, I buy ahl de crocus sock I can find, I jump on de pocket-*boat* — and here I am, oh, mon, I pray fah you.... I pray I fine you!"

Limekiller shook his head. It had been one daze, one shock after another. The only thing clear was that Harry Hazeed didn't seem angry. "You no understond?" Hazeed cried. "Mon! We going take your boat, we going doewn to Nutmeg P'int, we going to buy carn, mon! We going to buy ahl de carn dere is to buy! Nevah mine dat lee' bit money you di owe me, b'y! We going make plenty money, mon! And we going make de cultivators plenty money, too! What you theenk of eet, Jock, me b'y? Eh? Hey? What you theenk?"

Jack put his forefinger in his mouth, held it up. The wind was in the right quarter. The wind would, if it held up, and, somehow, it felt like a wind which would hold up, the wind would carry them straight and clear to Nutmeg Point: the clear, clean wind in the clear and starry night.

Softly, he said — and, old Hazeed leaning closer to make the words out, Limekiller said them again, louder, "I think it's great. Just great. I think it's great."

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THE DARK COMPANION

Opportunities for embarrassment come my way as they come anyone else's, and I don't always avoid them.

Although I am well known as a hard-nosed scientist unapt to accept rubbish (see ASIMOV'S COROLLARY, February 1977), I welcome new ideas if they are advanced by people who know what they are talking about and who respect rationality — and there we have the potentiality for embarrassment.

First a couple of cases where I was *not* embarrassed.

In 1974, a book called "The Jupiter Effect" by John Gribbin and Stephen Plagemann was published by Walker and Co. It dealt with the possible effect of planetary position on solar tides, thence on the solar wind, thence on plate tectonics on Earth, thence on earthquakes in California. It was tenuous reasoning that arrived at a very iffy conclusion, but though I didn't accept the conclusion, it seemed to me to be the work of honest and logical men; so when I was asked to write an introduction to the book, I did so. My name was eventually placed on the book jacket as prominently as the authors.

The book was roughly handled by many reviewers as I expected it might be, and my good friend, Les-

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Science

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ter del Rey, never tires of calling me an astrologer because of the introduction, but I stand by my guns. The book was worth a hearing, and I'm not ashamed of the association.

Then, in 1976, Doubleday published "The Fire Came By" by John Baxter and Thomas Atkins. It was a study in depth of the great Siberian explosion of 1908 that had long been assumed to have been caused by a meteorite. The authors took into account all the evidence they could gather and discussed all the explanations that have been offered once it became apparent that there was no sign of any crater or meteoric fragments. They end by suggesting that the explosion was caused by an extraterrestrial nuclear-powered vessel that went out of control and crashed into the Earth.

Larry Ashmead, then of Doubleday, asked me to look at the manuscript for a possible favorable comment but did so with considerable reluctance, for he assumed I would tear it up once I had read it.

I didn't. I found the book fascinating and honest and, in my opinion, worth a hearing. I *asked* Doubleday if I might do an introduction and when they said I might, I wrote one. My name appears on the book-jacket almost as prominently as those of the authors and though again I didn't accept the conclusion and I dare say that few astronomers will take the book seriously, I will again stick to my guns. I am not ashamed of this association, either.

And now for the embarrassment —

A book called "The Sirius Mystery" has just been published.* It deals with a West African tribe whose traditions seem to include knowledge of the satellites of Jupiter, of the rings of Saturn, and of the white dwarf companion of Sirius — knowledge they seem to attribute to travelers from a planet circling Sirius.

While the book was still in manuscript form, the author got in touch with me and asked me to read it so that I might give it some favorable comment. Very reluctantly, I agreed to let him send me the manuscript. After all, I can't very well refuse to *look* at what a man has to say.

The manuscript arrived, and I tried to read it. I hate to be unpleasant and insulting, for the author in his contact with me seemed a pleasant and sincere man — but the plain fact is that I found the book unreadable, and what I managed to choke down I found unconvincing.

Therefore, I refused any comment.

The author called me at one time thereafter and rather put pressure on

**Since I have nothing good to say of it, I will not name the author or publisher.*

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me to reconsider. I find it difficult to be rude, but I managed to maintain my refusal in an uneasily polite manner.

Then, he said, "Well, did you detect any errors?"

Of course I hadn't. I had read only a small portion of the book, a portion in which he talked about a West African tribe concerning which I knew nothing. He could have said anything at all without my being able to point out a definite *error.* So, to get rid of him and to be polite, I said, "No, I did not detect any errors."

I got what I deserved. That's what I said and I did not specify that I was not to be quoted — so when the book was published and advertisements appeared in the newspapers, there I was, quoted as telling the world there were no errors in the book.

I am embarrassed at my stupidity but I assure you I will never be caught that way again.

I will console myelf, somewhat, by telling you the tale of the discovery of the white dwarf companion of Sirius by modern astronomers, who did it without the help of extraterrestrial visitors.* It is a drama in three acts.

Act I — Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel — 1844

Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel was born in Minden, Prussia on July 22, 1784. He made his living as an accountant at first, but taught himself astronomy and at the age of 20 recalculated the orbit of Halley's comet with such elegance that the astronomer H. W. M. Olbers was sufficiently impressed to get him a job at an observatory.

In the 1830s, Bessel was engaged in the great astronomic adventure of that decade, the attempt to determine the distance of some star. To accomplish the task, astronomers had to choose a star that was comparatively near Earth and note the steady, elliptical shift in its position ("parallax"), compared to farther ones, as Earth turned in its orbit. But how could one pick out a nearby star when one didn't know beforehand which were near and which were far?

One must guess, and there were two possible cues. First, a bright star was more likely to be close than a dim star was, since proximity could be the cause of the brightness. Second, a star which shifted position ("proper motion") considerably from year to year relative to the other stars was

**I went into the subject briefly in TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE STAR (October, 1963), but that was a seventh of a century ago and I'm passing through in more detail this time, and in a different direction.*

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likely to be closer than one which shifted little, or not at all, since proximity tended to magnify the extent of the shift.

Two other investigators, Thomas Henderson and Friedrich G. W. von Struve, went for brightness. Henderson, at Capetown, South Africa took aim at Alpha Centauri, the brightest of the southern stars. Von Struve zeroed in on Vega, the brightest of the far northern stars.

Bessel went for fast motion and chose 61 Cygni, a rather dim star (5th magnitude) but one which happened to have the fastest proper motion known at the time.

All three men were successful, but Bessel announced his results first, in 1838, and he gets credit for being the first to determine the distance of a star.

Having won this victory, Bessel was ready to determine other distances, and eventually he decided to tackle Sirius. Sirius is the brightest of all the stars and therefore could well be one of our neighbors. (It is. Its distance is only 2/5 that of 61 Cygni.) It also has a fairly rapid proper motion.

Determining the parallax of a star isn't easy, however. If a star were absolutely motionless and if the Earth's motion were absolutely regular, and if the speed of light were infinite, and there were no atmosphere, it might be. But that is not the way it is, so it isn't.

A star might have a parallax and mark out an ellipse, but it also has a proper motion in a straight line. The combination of the straight proper motion and the elliptical parallax produces a wavy motion, which is further complicated by atmospheric refraction, by light aberration, by various wobbles in Earth's motion and so on. Every possible interference has to be allowed for and subtracted; and, finally, when everything has been subtracted, what's left over is parallax. Since every subtraction has its errors, the parallax with which you're left can be pretty fuzzy.

Bessel got to work on Sirius, observing it from night to night, checking other reported observations and so on. He allowed for all the minor factors, subtracted the proper motion, and got an ellipse — but it was not a parallax ellipse.

The ellipse marked out by a star's parallax has to be one that completes its turn in one year since a parallax reflects the yearly turn of Earth about the Sun. This did not happen in Sirius's case.

Bessel could easily tell that the ellipse he ended with took far more than a year to complete. In fact, at the rate Sirius was marking out that ellipse, it was going to take 50 years to complete it. So it wasn't parallax. It was something else.

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There *was* something else that could make a star move in a long-turning ellipse like that. The star might be a binary; it might be one of a pair that turned about each other, pivoting on the center of gravity of the system. William Herschel (see THE COMET THAT WASN'T, November 1976) had discovered such binaries in 1784, and they were by no means uncommon.

Why, then, shouldn't Sirius be a member of a binary system? It was just moving about a center of gravity, with another star always on the opposite side.

That was great, but there was a catch. Bessel couldn't see the other star. He knew exactly where it ought to be at all times from Sirius's movements and the law of gravity, but it just wasn't there.

Was the other star actually a planet? One could not possibly see planets at the distance of Sirius. (From Sirius one could see our Sun, but not Jupiter.)

It couldn't be a planet. The only reason you can't see planets is that they're too small to shine like a star; and if they're too small to do that, they're also too small to dispose of enough of a gravitational field to throw Sirius about like that. The other member of the binary *had* to be a star. It just couldn't be seen, even though it *was* a star.

In Bessel's time that was not such an unbelievable thing. Notions of the law of conservation of energy were in the air at that time, and it seemed reasonable to assume that a star only had a finite quantity of energy at its disposal. If so, a star could burn out just as a candle could. It took longer for a star to do so, but the principle was the same. Well, then, Sirius was accompanied by a star that had burned out, so of course it could not be seen.

In 1844, Bessel announced his discovery that Sirius had a dark companion. (Later on, he found that the bright star, Procyon, also had a dark companion.)

Bessel died in Konigsberg, Prussia, on March 17, 1846, and did not live to witness Act II of the drama.

Act II — Alvan Graham Clark — 1862

Alvan Graham Clark was born in Fall River, Massachusetts on July 10, 1832. His father, Alvan Clark, was a portrait painter who was fascinated by astronomy and lusted to grind lenses. (I don't understand the ecstasy of lens-grinding myself, but the history of astronomy is littered with peculiar people who would rather grind lenses than eat.)

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In the early 19th Century, however, all lens-grinders were British, French or German, and no self-respecting European astronomer could even conceive of an American turning out anything useful in that respect. The elder Clark let his work speak for itself. He ground lenses, placed them in telescopes which he used himself to make excellent observations, which he reported. European astronomers, curious as to the instruments Clark used, learned he had ground the lenses himself and began to place orders with him.

By 1859, Clark was a celebrity. He was invited to London, where the greatest British astronomers were delighted to meet him. He returned to the United States and established a telescope factory in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His younger son, Alvan Graham Clark worked with him.

In 1860, the Chancellor of the University of Mississippi wanted a good telescope with which to put the institution on the astronomical map. Since he was a Massachusetts-man, he thought of the Clarks and placed the order with them. The Clarks got to work at once. (Alas, the telescope never got to Mississippi. Within the year, the Civil War was on and Mississippi was enemy territory. The telescope, when completed, went to the University of Chicago, instead.)

By 1862, Alvan Graham Clark had a lens that was ground to a fare-thee-well and looked beautiful. The next step was to check it in practice.

Clark placed the lens in a telescope, pointed it at Sirius and took a good look at it. If the lens were perfect, he would see Sirius as a hard, bright, sharp point (allowing for a twinkle, if seeing wasn't very good). On the other hand, a tiny irregularity in the lens would blur or distort the point.

Clark looked and was chagrined to find a tiny spark of light in the vicinity of Sirius where no spark of light should be. The easy conclusion was that there was an irregularity to the lens which split off a tiny speck of Sirius's light.

And yet when Clark looked anywhere else in the sky, there were no apparent problems, and nothing he could do to the lens in the way of further perfecting its shape could make that spark of light near Sirius disappear. He finally decided he saw the spark of light because it existed. There was something there. The spark of light was in the position where the Dark Companion of Sirius should exist and that was it. He was seeing the Companion.

The Companion was not really very dim, for it had a magnitude of 7.1,

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almost bright enough for naked-eye visibility. It was, however, very close to Sirius, which was about 6000 times brighter and which blanked it out. It took a good lens to make out that dim spark in the face of that nearby brilliance, and so the trouble with Clark's lens was not its imperfection but its excellence.

One could no longer talk about the Dark Companion of Sirius. It was now a dim Companion. That didn't upset the apple cart too much, however. If the Companion was not exactly a dead cinder, it was apparently a dying one on its last flicker.

Alvan Graham Clark died in Cambridge on June 9, 1897, and he did not live to witness the third act in the drama.

Act III — Walter Sydney Adams — 1915, 1922

Walter Sydney Adams was the son of an American missionary couple working in the Middle East. He was born in Antioch, Syria on December 20, 1876 and was not brought to the United States till he was nine years old. After graduating from Dartmouth College in 1898, and following that with postgraduate training in Germany, he became an astronomer.

By this time, astronomy had been revolutionized by the use of the spectroscope. Astronomers were no longer restricted to noting the brightness and overall color of a star's light. That light could be spread out into a spectrum crossed by dark lines. From the positions and patterns of the dark lines, the chemical elements present in the star could be determined. From slight shifts in position as compared with the lines produced by the same element in the laboratory, one could determine whether the star was approaching or receding, and how quickly.

In 1893, the German physicist, Wilhelm Wien, had shown how spectra varied with temperature. It was now possible to study the spectrum produced by a star and determine its surface temperature. For instance, our Sun has a surface temperature of 6,000 C, but Sirius is a much hotter star and has a surface temperature of 11,000 C.

It was clear that stars differed in color because the pattern of wavelengths they emitted varied with temperature. No matter what the structure or composition of a star, if its surface temperature was 2,500 C it was red; if it was 4,500 C it was orange; if it was 6,000 C it was yellow-white; if it was 11,000 C it was pure white; if it was 25,000 C it was blue-white.

To Walter Sydney Adams this raised an interesting problem. The Companion of Sirius had now been known for seventy years and had always been viewed as a dead or dying star. but if the Companion were dy-

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ing and flickering toward extinction, it ought to be cool and therefore red in color. The trouble was that it was not red in color at all; it was white. It had to be hot, therefore, and it was hard to see how, in that case, it could be flickering out.

To reach a decision safely, what one needed was the spectrum of the Companion. Getting the spectrum of a seventh magnitude was no mean trick. In 1915, however, Adams managed to do it.

The spectrum removed all doubt. The Companion was almost as hot as Sirius itself was. It had a surface temperature of about 10,000 C, and so it was considerably hotter than our own Sun.

But that raised another question. If the Companion was almost as hot as Sirius was, then any given portion of the surface of the Companion should be nearly as brilliant as an equivalent portion of Sirius. Why, then, was it that the Companion was only 1/6000 as bright as Sirius altogether?

The only reasonable answer to that question was that though, portion for portion, the surface of the Companion was nearly as bright as the surface of Sirius, there was far less, *far* less, total surface in the Companion.

In fact, knowing how luminous a portion of the surface of the star ought to be from its temperature, it is possible to calculate the surface area of the star that would account for its apparent brightness, and from that we can calculate the diameter. It turns out, for instance, that the diameter of Sirius is 2,500,00 kilometers, or 1.8 times that of our Sun, while the diameter of the Companion is 47,000 kilometers or 0.033 that of our Sun.

The diameter of the Companion came as a shock, since the thought of a star that small seemed ludicrous. It was not just that it was smaller than our Sun; it was considerably smaller, even, than the planet Jupiter. It was, in fact, approximately the size of the planet Uranus.

Since the Companion was both white in color and dwarfish in size, it was called a "white dwarf" and was the first of a new class of stars, one that turned out to be fairly common. The Companion of Procyon, for instance, turned out to be a white dwarf, also.

As it happens, Sirius is sometimes called the "Dog Star," since it is the brightest star of the constellation of Canis Major, the "Great Dog." In view of that, some people took to calling the dwarfish companion "The Pup," a piece of cutesiness that is beneath contempt. The proper practice these days is to assign the stars of a multiple system letters of the alphabet in the order of brightness. Sirius is now called Sirius A and the Companion

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is Sirius B. (For this article I'll stick to Sirius and the Companion, however.)

The small size of the Companion is peculiar in itself, but what made it even more striking is that in other respects, the Companion is full-sized. From the distance between Sirius and the Companion and from the orbital period, it is possible to calculate that the total mass of the two stars is about 3.5 times that of the Sun. From the distance of each from the center of gravity, it can be shown that Sirius is 2.5 times the mass of the Sun and the Companion just about equal to the mass of the Sun.

But if the Companion has the mass of the Sun crammed into a globe with only 1/30 the diameter (and therefore 1/9000 the volume) of the Sun, then the average density of matter in the Companion must be 9000 times that of the Sun, or 12,600 grams per cubic centimeter, or about 575 times the density of platinum.

If Adams had announced his findings as little as five years before, it would have been thrown out of court. Such a density figure would have seemed so ridiculous that the whole system of measuring temperature by spectroscopy might have been questioned and, perhaps, discarded.

In 1911, however, the New Zealand-born physicist, Ernest Rutherford, had announced his theory of the nuclear atom based on his observations of the behavior of atoms under the bombardment by the newly-discovered sub-atomic radiations of radioactive elements. It became clear that atoms were mostly empty space and that almost the entire mass of each atom was concentrated in a tiny nucleus taking up only about one-quintillionth of the total space of the atom. It was easy to suppose the Companion, and all white dwarfs, to be made up of shattered atoms, so that the massive nuclei drew closer than they possibly could when part of intact atoms.

In those circumstances, the density of the Companion made sense. Indeed, far greater densities could also be possible.

Next came something else. The nature of the Companion having been worked out, it became possible to use it to prove something else even more esoteric.

In 1916, Albert Einstein had worked out his Theory of General Relativity. It made necessary three interesting phenomena for which the older Newtonian theory of gravitation had no room. One was the observed anomalous advance of the perihelion of Mercury (see THE PLANET THAT WASN'T, May 1975).

The second was that light would bend in its path when moving through a gravitational field. This bending was very slight but might be just de-

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tectable using a gravitational field as intense as the Sun's.

As it happened, on May 29, 1919, a Solar eclipse was scheduled to take place at just the time when more bright stars were in the vicinity of the eclipsed Sun than would be there at any other time of year. The Royal Astronomical Society of London made ready an expedition designed to test Einstein's theory.

The positions of the stars near the Sun were carefully measured during the eclipse. If the Einstein light-bending took place, each star would appear to be just a trifle farther from the Sun than it should be. The extent of the shift away would depend on the apparent distance from the Sun. It was tedious and difficult work and the results were not altogether clearcut, but on the whole they seemed to support Einstein and the astronomers on the spot were satisfied in that respect.

The third consequence of relativity was that light, climbing against a gravitational field, would lose some of its energy, that loss being related in a definite way to the intensity of the field. The loss in energy would mean that all the lines in the spectrum of the light would shift slightly toward the red end. This would be an "Einstein red-shift" as compared to the better-known "Doppler-Fizeau red-shift" which arose when the light source was receding from the observer.

The Einstein red-shift was a hard thing to test for. Even the Sun's gravitational field was not intense enough to produce a red-shift of this sort large enough to measure.

Then the British astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington, who was one of the first to accept Einstein's theory wholeheartedly, had an interesting idea. If the Companion of Sirius was of equal mass with the Sun, but had only 1/30 its diameter, then the surface gravity of the Companion ought to

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be 900 times that of the Sun. The Companion ought, therefore, to subject the light rising from its surface to 900 times the gravitational pull and it might produce an Einstein red-shift that could be detected.

Eddington alerted W. S. Adams to this fact, since Adams was the world expert on the Companion's spectrum.

Adams got to work. Sirius and its Companion are both receding from us and that produces a red-shift, but it does so in both alike so that was no problem. In addition, Sirius and its Companion circled about each other so that one might be receding relative to the other — but that was a known motion and could be allowed for.

Once all allowances were made, then any residual red-shift shown by the Companion's spectrum that was not present in Sirius's had to be an Einstein red-shift.

Adams made his measurements carefully and found that there *was* an Einstein red-shift and, what's more, that it was exactly as large as Einstein's theory predicted. This was the thirdand, up to that time, the most unequivocal demonstration of the truth of General Relativity.

It worked the other way around, too. If we assume that General Relativity is correct, then the fact that the Companion shows the Einstein red-shift demonstrates conclusively that it must have an extraordinarily high surface gravity and must indeed be far denser than ordinary stars and planets can be.

Since 1922, then, no one has doubted the astonishing characteristics of the Companion and of other white dwarfs. Yet since then, much more astonishing objects have been found which Adams (who died in Pasadena, California, on May 11, 1956) did not live to see. But that's for next month.

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Jane Yolen's story collections include THE MOON RIBBON and THE GIRL WHO CRIED FLOWERS (a National Book Award finalist). Both books were illustrated by David Palladini, an award-winning artist who contributed this month's cover for the enchanting new tale below.

The Hundredth Dove

by JANE YOLEN

There once lived in the forest of old England a fowler named Hugh who supplied all the gamebirds for the high king's table.

The larger birds he hunted with a bow, and it was said of him that he never shot but that a bird fell, and sometimes two. But for the smaller birds that flocked like gray clouds over the forest, he used only a silken net he wove himself. This net was soft and fine and did not injure the birds though it held them fast. Then Hugh the fowler could pick and chose the plumpest of the doves for the high King's table and set the others free.

One day in early summer, Hugh was summoned to court and brought into the throne room.

Hugh bowed low, for it was not often that he was called into the king's own presence. And indeed he felt uncomfortable in the palace, as though caught in a stone cage.

"Rise, fowler, and listen," said the king. "In one week's time I am to be married." Then, turning with a smile to the woman who sat by him, the king held out her hand to the fowler.

The fowler stared up at her. She was neat as a bird, slim and fair, with black eyes. There was a quiet in her, but a restlessness too. He had never seen anyone so beautiful.

Hugh took the tiny hand offered him and put his lips to it, but he only dared to kiss the gold ring that glittered on her finger.

The king looked carefully at the fowler and saw how he trembled. It made the king smile. "See, my lady, how your beauty turns the head of even my fowler. And he is a man who lives as solitary as a monk in his wooded cell."

The lady smiled and said nothing, but she drew her hand away from Hugh.

The king then turned again to the fowler. "In honor of my bride,

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the Lady Columba, whose name means dove and whose beauty is celebrated in all the world, I wish to serve one hundred of the birds at our wedding feast."

Lady Columba gasped and held up her hand. "Please do not serve them, sire."

But the king spoke to the fowler. "I have spoken. Do not fail me, fowler."

"As you command," said Hugh and he bowed again. He touched his hand to his tunic where his motto, *Servo*, "I serve," was sewn over the heart.

Then the fowler went back to the cottage deep in the forest where he lived.

There he took out the silken net and spread it upon the floor. Slowly he searched the net for snags and snarls and weakened threads. These he rewove with great care, sitting straight-backed at his wooden loom.

After a night and a day he was done. The net was as strong as his own stout heart. He laid the net down on the hearth and slept a dreamless sleep.

Before dawn Hugh set out into the forest clearing which only he knew. The trails he followed were less than deer runs, for the fowler needed no paths to show him the way. He knew every tree, every stone in the forest as a lover knows the form of his beloved. And he served the forest easily as well as he served the high king.

The clearing was full of life; yet so silent did the fowler move, neither bird nor insect remarked his coming. He crouched at the edge, his brown and green clothes a part of the wood. Then he waited.

A long patience was his strength, and he waited the whole of the day, neither moving nor sleeping. At dusk the doves came, settling over the clearing like a grey mist. And when they were down and greedily feeding, Hugh leapt up and swung the net over the nearest ones in a single swift motion.

He counted twenty-one doves in his net, all but one gray-blue and meaty. The last was a dove that was slim, elegant, and white as milk. Yet even as Hugh watched, the white dove slipped through the silken strands that bound it and flew away into the darkening air.

Since Hugh was not the kind of hunter to curse his bad luck but rather praise his good, he gathered up the twenty and went home. He placed the doves in a large wooden cage whose bars he had carved out of white oak.

Then he looked at his net. There was not a single break in it, no way for the white dove to have escaped. Hugh thought long and hard about this, but at last he lay down to the cooing of the captured birds and slept.

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In the morning the fowler was up at dawn. Again he crept to the forest clearing and waited, quieter than any stone, for the doves. And again he threw his net at dusk and caught twenty fat gray doves and the single white one.

But, as before, the white dove slipped through his net as easily as air.

The fowler carried the gray doves home and caged them with the rest. But his mind was filled with the sight of the white bird, slim and fair. He was determined to capture it.

For five days and nights it was the same except for this one thing: on the fifth night there were only nineteen gray doves in his net. He was short of the hundred by one. Yet he had taken all of the birds in the flock but the white dove.

Hugh looked into the hearthfire but he felt no warmth. He placed his hand upon the motto above his heart. "I swear by the king whom I serve and by the lady who will be his queen that I will capture that bird," he said. "I will bring the hundred doves to them. I shall not fail."

So the sixth day, well before dawn, the fowler arose. He checked the net one final time and saw it was tight. Then he was away to the clearing.

All that day Hugh sat at the clearing's edge, still as a stone. The meadow was full of life. Songbirds sang that had never sung there before. Strange flowers grew and blossomed and died at his feet; yet he never looked at them. Animals that were once and were no longer came out of the forest shadows and passed him by: the hippocampus, the gryphon, and the silken swift unicorn. But he never moved. It was for the white dove he waited, and at last she came.

In the quickening dark she floated down, feather light and luminous at the clearing's edge. Slowly she moved, eating and cooing and calling for her missing flock. She came in the end to where Hugh sat and began to feed at his feet.

He moved his hands once and the net was over her; then his hands were over her, too. The dove twisted and pecked, but he held her close, palms upon wings, fingers on neck.

When the white dove saw she could not move, she turned her bright black eyes on the fowler and spoke to him in a cooing woman's voice:

Master fowler, set me free,
Gold and silver I'll give thee.

"Neither gold nor silver tempt me," said Hugh. "*Servo* is my motto. I serve my master. And my master is the king."

Then the white dove spoke again:

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Master fowler, set me free,
Fame and fortune follow thee.

But the fowler shook his head and held on tight. "After the king, I serve the forest," he said. "Fame and fortune are not masters here." He rose with the white dove in his hands and made ready to return to his house.

Then the bird shook itself all over and spoke for a third time. Its voice was low and beguiling:

Master fowler, free this dove,
The Queen will be your own true love.

For the first time, then, the fowler noticed the golden ring that glittered and shone on the dove's foot though night was almost on them. As if in a vision, he saw the Lady Columba again, slim and neat and fair. He heard her voice and felt her hand in his.

He began to tremble and his heart began to pulse madly. He felt a burning in his chest and limbs. Then he looked down at the dove and it seemed to be smiling at him, its black eyes glittering.

"*Servo*," he cried out, his voice skaking and dead. "*Servo*." He closed his eyes and twisted the dove's neck. Then he touched the motto on his tunic. He could feel the word *Servo* impress itself coldly on his fingertips. One quick rip and the motto was torn from his breast. He flung it to the meadow floor, put the limp dove in his pouch, and went through the forest to his home.

The next day the fowler brought the hundred doves — the ninety-nine live ones and the one dead — to the king's kitchen. But there was never a wedding. The Lady Columba came neither to the chapel nor the castle, and her name was never spoken of again in the kingdom.

The fowler gave up hunting and lived on berries and fruit the rest of his life. Every day he made his way to the clearing to throw out grain for the birds. Around his neck, from a chain, a gold ring glittered. And occasionally he would touch the spot on his tunic above his heart, which was shredded and torn.

But though songbirds and sparrows ate his grain, and swallows came at his calling, he never saw another dove.

Coming soon:

Special Harlan Ellison Issue

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REPORT ON COMPETITION 15

In the December issue we asked for odd examples of sf titles that had been retranslated back into English after appearing in a French history of SF. This one was very hard to judge because of the large number of repeats, and also because of the uniform high quality of almost all entries; we didn't have the usual batches of standouts and clunkers that make the C. E's job easier. You're all getting too good.

FIRST PRIZE

I Am Crying, Said the Policeman, Philip K. Dick
He Has A Hole In His Head and His Teeth Glow in the Dark, Roger Zelazny
The Gnome Booking, Clifford Simak
Noctural and Diurnal Animals, Roger Zelazny
R Is for Spaceship, Ray Bradbury
The Tin Men Go To Sleep, Isaac Asimov
All Animals Are Vegetables, Clifford Simak

— Cambridge University Science Fiction Society

SECOND PRIZE

A Box of Scruples, James Blish
Dendrites, Lester del Rey
Get Out of My Way! Get Out of My Way!, Harry Harrison
A For Whatever, Damon Knight
Humaner, Theodore Sturgeon
A Serious Undertaking, Hal Clement

— Chris Riesbeck

RUNNERS UP

Towards Here Is Coming An Evil Thing, Ray Bradbury
Rascal Moon, Algis Budrys
To Your Broadcast Bodies, Get Yourselves, Philip Jose Farmer
Tales of A Moribund Bird, Harlan Ellison
Farther Than Apollo, Barry Malzberg

— Michael Bishop

Shadrach In the Oven, Robert Silverberg
The Streets Must Roll, Robert A. Heinlein
And Disorder Died, Joanna Russ
The Stars, Like Dirt, Isaac Asimov
Purchase Jupiter, Isaac Asimov

— Marc Russell

Us, Yevegeny Zamyatin
Tau Nothing, Poul Anderson
Go To Your Loose Bodies, Philip Jose Farmer
Martian Time-Mistake, Philip Dick

— Anne Conner

Sturgeon Lives Comfortably, Theodore Sturgeon
Mr. Robot, That's Me, Isaac Asimov
Guts, Lester Del Rey
We Sold Space, Pohl & Kornbluth
Shove Over! Shove Over! Harry Harrison

— Daniel P. Dern

A Balm for the Blues, Ray Bradbury
Don't Ask, Dragoon, Gordon Dickson
A Bit Unclear, H. Beam Piper
Not That One, Tom Tryon

— John Billingsley

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Death of the Negro Celebrity, John W. Campbell
By His Shoelaces, Robert Heinlein
The Door of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth, Roger Zelazny (research has failed to reveal the original of this obvious double translation).

— Charles and Sarah Sheffield

COMPETITION 16 (suggested by Larry Tritten)

Send us a sample (limit of 250 words) from a Dear Abby Column of a century or so from now, when some of our best friends may have tentacles, eye-stalks and the like, e. g.:

Dear Ybba:

While waiting in the Martian spaceport for the jitney to Neptune, I saw a large, muscular, mauve-colored alien humanoid drop a role of currency without noticing. I courteously called his attention to the loss, whereupon he nodded once, bowed curtly, then sprang at me and began savagely pummeling me. He wrestled me across the terminal floor, emitting high-pitched fluting cries as he vigorously flailed me, and before I could win free I was badly cut and bruised. My assailant nodded and bowed again, seeming quite pleased.

?????

— Dumfounded

Dear Dumfounded:

Your bafflement is understandable. But the next time you travel you should read your Star Guide more carefully. You are not the first person who was ever dumfounded by an Aubian. Aubians celebrate danger, intrigue, and combat as life's fondest pastimes (much like the ancient Vikings of Earth). Consequently, an Aubian expresses gratitude by offering a brief, hearty brawl. Conversely, hostility is indicated by overly polite, deferential treatment. This type of behavior is an excellent example of the many cultural vagaries which have made inter-galactic communication so frequently vexing — and fascinating. The first ambassador set to Aub by Earth was nearly responsible for starting a war between the two planets because he initially refused to address his Aubian peers with blows and slaps.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by April 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, Six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 16 will appear in the August issue.

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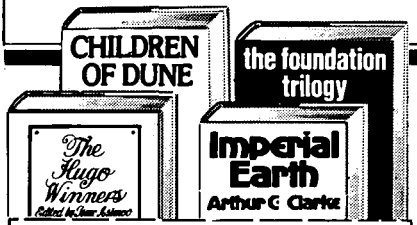

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